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Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

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GO, FALDRA, GO!

Myusel Fourant
Koganuma Minori
Clara
Kanou Shinichi
Amatena Harneiman

Chapter One: Well, Whaddaya Know — It's Another Country!

My normal life ended when I opened my eyes.

I stared upward for a few seconds, not saying anything at first. I didn't recognize the ceiling above me—leading me to reflexively mutter, "An unfamiliar... ceiling..."

I quoted from an anime that shall remain nameless (but which is so old that this particular quote is pretty much cliché by now), showing that I was *still* a total, lost-cause otaku. Which was another way of saying I was functioning normally.

Wait... What's with this feeling of déjà vu?!

I vaguely recalled having been in this exact situation before, and even saying the exact same thing about it.

"I really *don't* recognize this ceiling, though," I said, refocusing my eyes upward.

On a normal day, the first thing I saw when I woke up was a sort of half-spherical ceiling worked with elaborate patterns.

That was because I slept in a canopy bed, as befitted my position—so the "ceiling" I'm referring to wasn't the actual ceiling of my room... Anyway, forget it. I'm just trying to explain what I usually saw when I woke up.

Above me now, though, was a white, flat ceiling with no decoration whatsoever. If anything, it reminded me most of my room back in Japan—somewhere I hadn't been in more than six months.

And that meant...

"No way..." I sat bolt upright in bed. "It turns out my *entire* story really was *just a dream*?!"

I was stunned.

Had all of it been nothing more than the unconscious imaginings of a pathetic home security guard? Every one of my adventures and experiences,

just the passing fancies of adolescence?! Was my unconscious mind really that eager to run from reality?!

So was everything really just dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows?! Was the real world a dream, and my dreams reality? Was I actually just a butterfly?! Would I come back to myself to discover that I was just the product of the imagination of young ****ta, left in a vegetative state after a traffic accident?! What even is reality?!

.....etc., etc.

But just as I was about to get sucked into the chuunibyou vortex, I realized something.

This wasn't my room in Japan. This wasn't my room at all.

If it had been, the first thing I would have seen upon opening my eyes would have been my life-sized poster of Madoka, heroine of the anime *Rental☆Madoka*. She's a magical girl who bravely endures despite working for a really sucky company. But I saw no hint of her feeble smile.

"So where *am* I...?"

The bed I was sleeping in was definitely not canopied, but it was big enough to accommodate at least three full-grown adults. I knew my house in Japan hadn't had a bed this large.

So this wasn't my Japan house.

But it wasn't my Eldant one, either.

So... Where?

Alert, I looked slowly around the room. I didn't recognize the interior decoration at all. It was about the same size as my bedroom in my mansion, though—in other words, about twenty mats.

The windows were covered with thick drapes, lines of bright light leaking between them. It was enough to take the edge off the darkness in the room and allow me to see what was in there.

The furniture consisted of the bed I was in, a desk, and a chair. Not much in the way of furnishings, to be sure, but the wallpaper boasted an intricate pattern, the curtains were embroidered, and there were paintings hanging on the walls—not exactly spartan, either.

But still...

"It's like..."

Something was different. The overall impression wasn't the Middle Ages European one characteristic of Eldant houses. Instead the design was

a little more Asian, maybe even kind of Middle Eastern. Tribal, almost. I mean, I was no anthropologist or anything; it just *felt* like it came from a different culture.

"Okay, seriously. Where am I?" I muttered. But then I caught my breath, struck by another wave of déjà vu.

The bed was different, and the room was different. The feeling of waking up and finding myself in a totally unfamiliar place, though? That I remembered.

"No way."

This sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen to a person several times in his life.

I had been tricked by the Japanese government, kidnapped by the Japan Self Defense Force, and before I knew it I was in a different world. Even lightning didn't strike twice. Something as ridiculous as what had happened to me couldn't happen a second time...

"No way..."

...Could it?

That was when I spotted something in my peripheral vision. I turned toward it with a start.

There was a single young woman, silently standing at attention.

She was standing up against the wall, almost as if she were part of the furniture.

That rang a bell, too.

So, wait, could this be—

"A loop?!" I exclaimed. "Am I trapped in an endless cycle?!"

Was some invisible force manipulating my world, rewinding it so I would experience the same things over and over again even as my memories remained unchanged?! How could I ever hope to eſcape from thiſ temporal maze?!

...Wooh. I was getting so out of sorts that I was thinking in old letterforms.

It was as I was having this moment of panic that I registered something: the girl by the wall wasn't moving. Even though I had just been shouting in a language that she presumably didn't understand, she just stood silently and watched me.

What was going on here? It had to mean...

“That’s... not Myusel?”

If it had been, I was sure she would have given a little yelp of surprise.

Or was she just that used to my strange behavior by now?

But then...

I squinted, taking a closer look at the girl. The darkness had kept me from realizing at first, but...

“Wuh-huh?!”

Her hair was black—or... green? In the dim light, her eyes shone a clear emerald color.

But it wasn’t her hair color that held me transfixed. It was cut short in a kind of boyish look, but that only made her most prominent features stand out all the more. Poking out from under her hair...

“IS THAT ***REALLY*** A BEAST GIRL?!” I found myself shouting, my hand clenching into a triumphant fist.

Yes! Those were animal ears!

They stood out exactly because the hair didn’t hide them. Those ears! So striking, so much a part of this girl’s particular beauty! Covered in short fur like a cat or a dog might have, they burst through her hair, making her look so real and alive!

“Ohhh...!” I trembled with admiration.

I mean, not that this was the first time I had seen a beast girl. A werewolf named Elvia lived at my mansion. She had a very upbeat and cheerful personality; she really ticked all the beast-girl boxes. She had the friendly, outgoing nature that you look for in a beast person, especially a doglike one. It was terrific.

But. *But.*

There were more kinds of beast girls than just doglike ones.

That’s right: I’m referring to the manga—truly a classic, practically on the level of scripture—*Nishiki no Kuni* ☆. As Chi**-neko demonstrates, the original beast girl was a cat!

So, yes. The beast girl in front of me was a cat. She was probably a weretiger or something of the sort. I guessed as much because her cheeks and body—like her belly and her arms—clearly had some differently colored fur mixed in. It seemed unique, almost like a tattoo.

What’s that? Why could I see so much of her midriff, you ask?

That, of course, is because it was bare.

How marvelous is a girl in skimpy clothing! (I was very excited.)

Her outfit reminded me of something from some desert country—or at least from the *Arabian Nights*. Her chest and hips—in other words, the definite no-go zones—were covered with clothes worked with a geometric design. But her belly button was right out there, although for some reason her arms and legs were covered with sheer cloth. It didn't hide her limbs; their color and shape was plainly visible.

Incidentally, the girl's body shape made it look like she wasn't yet mature—I mean she was pretty clearly young, with an underdeveloped chest and narrow hips. Practically a child.

But even so—in fact, almost because of that—those clothes were deadly.

In some ways, it was more alluring than if she had been completely exposed: revealing a little bit of flesh makes you wonder what else she's hiding. Beautiful is the flower that blooms in secret! The vibe she gave off walked the line between virtue and deviance the way only a young body can!

That which is exuded by a body just a step—no, a half-step!—from nudity... This, this itself, is truly *eros*!

.....etc., etc.

Before I knew it, I had gotten carried away with a panegyric that would probably have caused people to recoil from me if I had spoken it aloud. Now I took a fresh look at the girl.

Huh...?

"Who... *are* you?"

Only now did it register with me: if this was really a loop, a repeat of what had happened before, then it should have been Myusel standing there. But Myusel was a half-elf; she was no beast girl. Then again, I supposed there was always the possibility that, suspecting my affinity for beast girls, she had stuck on ears and a tail before coming to wake me up.

But no, this was definitely the first time I had ever seen this girl.

Her face was part of what made her look young; her eyes were large and her nose was petite. She had small, pursed lips. Her youthful looks reminded me of a certain empress I knew, but the impression she gave was completely different. Almost the opposite, in fact.

This maid girl watched me with a soft, emotionless expression, not so much as moving a muscle. Her silence was overwhelming. She was almost

like a doll.

Who or what in the world was she?

“Ummm...”

I put a hand to my cheek and searched my memory. What was the last thing I could remember before I woke up here?

I remembered waking up early in the morning at my mansion in Eldant. I didn’t feel like going back to sleep, so I decided to kill time with a little walk around the house.

And then...

“.....Huh...?”

No good. My recollection went fuzzy at that point.

My head felt kind of heavy. I was sure I had slept well, and yet I felt like I hadn’t slept enough. I had the sense that what I wanted was just in front of me, but I couldn’t quite reach it...

This wasn’t getting me anywhere. I decided to question the girl.

“Hey.”

She didn’t say anything, but she didn’t seem to be ignoring me. She cocked her head quizzically at me.

Whoa! That innocent gesture— That gesture*—!*

I set my burgeoning feelings of moe aside and asked, “Who are you? And where am I?”

It looked like she was about to answer me, because she opened her mouth...

“This is the eastern city of Borfoi. You’re in the Kingdom of Bahairam.”

The voice, however, came from someone else. I looked over in shock.

I saw a door, one that looked quite severe compared to everything else around here. It was half-open, and a young woman was entering the room.

A soldier...?

This woman was definitely *not* half-naked, and the clothes she was wearing looked pretty somber—very much like a military uniform, in fact. For the most part her outfit was plain and unadorned, but at her shoulders, neck, and cuffs were colors bright enough to draw the eye. She even had a sword at her hip.

What surprised me most, though, was not her clothes.

“Huh...?”

I thought I remembered this girl.

Or rather, I thought she looked exactly like someone I knew.

Elvia?

She was a dead ringer for the beast girl from my house. Her face, her hair, her height, and even the animal ears on her head were all just like Elvia's.

The only difference was the color. Whereas Elvia had dark hair and ears, the doppelgänger in front of me had white. If you only looked at her face, you would swear it was Elvia; it was like the palette-swapped version of a character you get when you drop in as player two in a video game.

"Wh-What's with the outfit? Going for a new look?"

Maybe she had gotten a little too into the cosplay we had done a while back. *Heh, probably not...*

Elvia, however, typically dressed in clothes so skimpy that she might as well just be wearing underwear. This formal, almost entirely skin-free sort of dress was definitely not the werewolf I was used to.

I had to admit, it had a certain freshness to it. She had looked adorable in the sailor uniform we had given her for our movie shoot, sure, but this had a certain...

"New look?" 2P Elvia (temp name) asked, raising an eyebrow at me. "What are you mouthing off about?"

"Um....."

I blinked. So this... wasn't... Elvia?

I mean, yes, I'd had some sense that it wasn't *actually* Elvia, but they looked so eerily identical that I had kind of thought maybe their personalities would be similar, too. But 2P Elvia (temp name) was pretty much the other Elvia's polar opposite in tone and voice.

For one thing, I had never seen Elvia with an expression quite like this.

In my experience, she was the picture of innocence, always smiling cheerfully. I had never known her to stare someone down the way this person was doing to me. She was kind of expressionless, a lot like the beast-girl maid I'd seen first, but this girl had a strength of will that came through just the same.

I was reminded anew how important facial expressions were for communication. One face with two different expressions could give you a very different impression.

"Um... Who... are you?"

2P Elvia came in, closing the door behind her; it shut with a click that sounded like an automatic lock. She approached the foot of the bed where I was still sitting upright and said, “I am Amatena Harneiman.”

Harneiman. That was Elvia’s family name, too.

Did that mean they were related by blood? That would explain why they looked so alike. A little *too* alike, really. Could they be twins or something?

I just stared stupidly at 2P Elvia—er, Amatena.

Then I finally registered something.

“Did you say Bahairam?”

I was sure she had. *The eastern city of Borfoi. The Kingdom of Bahairam.*

It looked like I wasn’t in the Holy Eldant Empire anymore.

The Kingdom of Bahairam, if I recalled my geography, was a neighboring country of the Eldant Empire. I was also pretty sure they were at war, and that border skirmishes had been going on for quite a while. On top of all that, Elvia was a spy for them, and—

"Bahairam!"

Whatever sleepiness had been left vanished in an instant. Now was the moment when my brain started to work at a frenzy. *Where were you earlier?!*

"Why am I in Bahairam?!"

She didn't answer.

"Where is everybody, anyway?!"

She still didn't answer. Amatena just continued to fix me with that icy gaze and not say anything.

I tried again, desperately, to remember what had happened before I woke up here.

I was walking around, and then... And then... When I opened my eyes, I was here.

What was the last thing I could remember?

I was pretty sure I had heard a noise in the shrubbery, and when I went to look... I think something covered my eyes... And then my memories cut off like a bad film clip.

"Wait..."

So was this...

You know. That thing they do in American movies all the time, where somebody gets knocked out with chloroform or something?

What I mean is, I was brought here against my will. Kidnapped! Abducted! Made off with!

And that probably implied that this room was a cell. A cage!

One ugly thought after another danced through my head, much as I wished they wouldn't.

"B-B-B-B-But why would you do that?!"

The strange thing was, the idea made Amatena's resemblance to Elvia seem really creepy. I was seized by an unthinking terror, the kind you would feel if your friends suddenly decided to kill you one day for no reason.

I scooched backward, trying to get even a millimeter farther away from Amatena. It was a huge bed, so I was able to gain a little space, but it wasn't

long before I found myself with my back literally against the wall.

Amatena, meanwhile, continued to look down at me with no change in her expression. There was no way to guess what she might be thinking. As I said, her resemblance to Elvia scared me now.

“Why did you k-kidnap me?”

“I am not permitted to explain that at the present time,” Amatena said.

Permitted? Permitted how?

Actually, I had been expecting her to deny that *kidnap* was the right word, but she completely ignored that. She might as well have come out and said I was right.

But seriously... Why?

Amatena turned on her heel so that her back was to me. The movement looked weirdly mechanical, stiff. Almost as if she were putting on for one of those by-the-books military types.

With her back to me, I could see her tail, the same white color as her ears. That was different from Elvia, too. Her fluffy tail moved nonstop, but Amatena’s didn’t so much as wag, as if it had been stuck down with glue.

Then Amatena knocked on the door and with another click, it opened. Apparently it was impossible to open it from inside.

“Kuraaara, he’s all yours,” she said as she closed the door.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The answer came from the half-naked beast girl, who had been quiet all this time. I guess her name was Clara.

“But what in the world is going on here...?” In the face of this mystifying situation, utter confusion was my only response.

My name is Kanou Shinichi.

I don’t mean to brag, but I’m a completely average, totally unremarkable high-schooler.

Or perhaps I should say I *was* a high-schooler. There’s a serious question of whether my old school even retains any record of me by now.

Anyway.

I... am an otaku.

In a word, I adore anime and manga and games and light novels. Your typical Akiba maniac. Again, nothing really unusual. You can see dozens of people just like me in Akihabara on any given weekend, or at Comiket or WonF*s.

The difference between me and them is that for all the otaku out there, there aren't many who have been duped by the Japanese government and dragged off to an alternate world to spread the gospel of geek culture as the General Manager of the parallel-world-first entertainment company, Amutech.

You heard me. An alternate world.

This is top-secret stuff—but Japan is engaged in diplomacy with another world.

It all started with a hole someone discovered near Mt. Fuji in the "Sea of Trees," an area better known as one of the most famous places in the country to commit suicide.

This hole—and no one knows exactly how yet—contained a link to another world, a Middle Ages-style fantasy land with dragons and magic, the sort of place that appears in all kinds of games and manga.

You'd think that would be the discovery of the century, wouldn't you? The Japanese government, however, covered it up; they began to investigate the hole by themselves, keeping it a secret from any other countries.

And it was just as big a find as you would think. Virgin land, untapped resources, unknown cultures. If Japan could keep all this to itself, it could lead to an explosion of wealth, enough to lift Japan straight out of the economic doldrums it had been in for so long and make the country the world's second-largest economy once again.

Thus the Japanese government opened diplomacy with the country it found on the far side of this secret hole—the Holy Eldant Empire.

Magic, a unique feature of this other world, made communication simple. Magical telepathy allowed relations to progress with astonishing smoothness.

The problems came after that.

Diplomacy was all well and good, but Japan couldn't do anything too obvious. If they moved too many people or resources over to the Eldant Empire, they would be discovered by some foreign power—and anyway, the hyperspace tunnel leading to the other world was pretty tight. It was just

big enough for a large-ish truck to get through.

Naturally, then, they sent a small number of people to exchange resources that were limited in both scale and size. Cultural exchange seemed like the way to go.

But as it turned out, the Eldant Empire, having a very not-Japanese history and culture, showed no interest in any of the traditional Japanese goods they were offered "as a token of friendship."

So what's a stymied government to do? The Japanese delegation, afraid that all the things they were hoping to gain from the Eldant Empire were about to slip through their fingers, tried every object and item they could think of. And strangely enough, the one thing the inhabitants of this world had the best reaction to was manga and anime, stuff hot off the streets of Akihabara.

It looked like otaku culture was going to be Japan's way in here.

So it was that the Japanese government decided to make otaku culture the tent pole of their diplomatic strategy. However, they quickly discovered that no one in the government really knew that much about otaku stuff. Or rather—as I learned later—there were a few people who met the criteria, but for one reason or another, none of them were suitable for posting as the "goodwill ambassador."

Well, then they would just have to find someone who was.

And the person they settled on was a home security guard who was in danger of being evicted from his home by his parents, and thus was dispiritedly looking for work in Akihabara. Namely, me. Kanou Shinichi.

So that's my story.

The government pretty much tricked me—heck, they *did* trick me—and dragged me off to the Holy Eldant Empire in this other world. They made me General Manager of Amutech and charged me with spreading otaku culture.

Yeah, I was surprised, too, at first. And definitely confused.

But you know what else is surprising? How much this turned out to be the perfect job for me.

By and large, we had been pretty successful at spreading otaku culture to this new world. A little *too* successful, in fact, to the extent that I worried some people were becoming addicted.

That was when the other shoe dropped.

I learned that the whole cultural exchange thing was just a pretense. This was an invasion.

Japan's "peace constitution" meant the country didn't have a lot of military weapons—so they would just conduct their invasion without them. If we could get people addicted to otaku culture, so much the better in the eyes of the Japanese government. It would provide the foothold they needed to essentially make the Eldant Empire a vassal state.

When I found out about that, I rebelled. Why? Because I thought of all the friends I had made in the Eldant Empire—Myusel the maid, Brooke the gardener, the Empress Petralka, the artist Elvia, the knight Garius and the Prime Minister Zahar, among others—and I couldn't stand the idea of becoming their enemy.

There was another reason, though, which was that I also hated the thought that my beloved manga and anime and games and light novels were being used as tools of invasion.

Naïve? Maybe. Anyway, as a result, some people in the Eldant Empire who had caught on to the fact that their culture was being undermined committed an act of terrorism, and meanwhile the Japanese government, upset that I had "gone rogue," sent a JSDF special forces unit to liquidate me. Let's just say it was pretty tense for a while.

With plenty of help from those around me, though, I somehow managed to get through all of it.

Even the Japanese government decided that as long as I was producing results, they would wink at what I had done (a weirdly tsundere-ish policy), and had been pretty flexible since then. The result was a relatively idyllic stretch of time.

Until now...

After 2P Elvia—I mean, Amatena—left the room, I just sat there, unable to move, staring at the door she had gone through. A good look suggested that door was by far the toughest thing in the room, and judging by the movement and sound when she closed it, it was probably made of steel. It had a doorknob but no keyhole. I guessed it could only be opened from the

outside.

In other words, this might have looked like a normal room, but it was really a prison.

But hang on...

“Bahairam...”

That was the name of the place that our beast-girl-cum-artist-in-residence, Elvia, hailed from. She had actually started off as a spy for this country. On the orders of her nation, which had mistaken the Amutech mansion for some kind of military installation, she had been sent to observe us. Which is where we had caught her, but in exchange for not executing her, she was required to work at my house.

In any event, Elvia was at heart an earnest and easygoing person, so much so that I soon forgot that she was really a spy sent by an enemy nation.

And that’s what she was. Bahairam was really an enemy of the Holy Eldant Empire. As what amounted to a guest of the Eldant Empire, that effectively made them my enemies as well—or at the very least, the Kingdom of Bahairam probably regarded me as one of *their* enemies.

And that was dangerous. Very, very dangerous.

It meant I had effectively been kidnapped by a hostile nation.

I had no idea why they would do such a thing, but I wasn’t expecting a warm welcome.

Torture, maybe. Execution. Brainwashing. My mind was flooded with the most hideous possible imaginings.

One wrong move, and I could end up in trouble I would never get out of.

“But how in the world could I possibly...?”

And so on and so forth.

“Sire.”

My thoughts, half-frozen with panic and terror, were interrupted by a voice from nearby. The tone was very businesslike, almost emotionless.

I looked over and saw that the beast girl named Clara was suddenly at my bedside. And she was staring straight at me.

Which suggested...

“‘Sire’... Do you mean me?”

“Yes,” Clara said with a crisp nod. “I apologize for failing to introduce myself. I am called Clara Belbaris.”

“Uh—Uh, sure. Nice to meet you. I’m Kanou Shinichi.”

“I know,” Clara said with another nod.

Ooh! Man, something about that gesture was really cute. She didn’t have a lot of expression, but the way it sort of evoked a small bird or something, it was just—ahhh! You know what I mean, don’t you? Don’t you?

“I have been instructed to see to your needs, Sire.”

“*My* needs?”

“Yes, Sire,” Clara said forcefully.

Ahh!

My heart danced in my chest.

“Sire!” *Go-shujin-sama!!*

Clara’s address echoed in my head, accompanied by Japanese subtitles.

What a brilliant and beautiful thing to say!

I mean, this was *go-shujin-sama* we were talking about. How many maid-lovers must there be across the country who dreamed of being called such a thing, only to have to bear up with harsh reality...!

And while the person addressing me might not be wearing a maid uniform, she was a sweet young woman. Physically small, almost as if she was still growing—in fact, how old *was* she, anyway?

Granted, I had one very specific example of someone who wouldn’t have looked out of place with an elementary-schooler’s backpack on, yet who turned out to be nearly my age—so I knew how dangerous it could be to judge someone by their looks.

On top of all that, Clara here had animal ears and a tail. Another deliciously adorable element—they looked great on her.

“To imagine the day would come when a girl like this called me ‘Sire’...!”

I clenched my fist, overflowing with emotion.

But then through my mind—

Master...

—flashed the image of a half-elf maid.

“Huh...?!”

No! No, Myusel, it’s not like that!

As great as it is to be called “Master” by you, “Sire” is, you know—it’s

the classic maid word, and so, uh, you see, I wasn't really...!

Believe me, you'll always be my maid of maids, number one in my maid ranking! This is just, I mean, we're not really talking about the list right now, and, uh...!

And so on, meaningless excuses flooding my head at high speed.

"I wonder how everyone is doing..."

Myusel. Petralka. Minori-san. Elvia. Brooke. Cerise.

Did any of them know I was here, in Bahairam? Or had nobody figured out yet that I had been taken?

They must have been worried that I wasn't there—or at least, so I liked to think.

But...

"Sire," Clara said again. I had fallen silent. "I wish to serve you."

"Huh—? Oh. S-Serve... me? Oh, serve me, right."

That's what maids do, right? They serve. Basic.

They make food, or do the laundry, or clean the house, occasionally being klutzy in the process.

I nodded, picturing Myusel bustling industriously about the mansion.

The thought of food made me pause to wonder: what time was it?

I put my hand to the curtain covering the window on my bed. All the sunlight implied it definitely wasn't nighttime, but—

"Yikes."

I opened the curtain a little and peeked out to discover that the window pane was reinforced and barred.

Yep. Definitely a prison.

This dose of cold, hard reality sent a serious chill down my spine.

"Will you have a meal? Or would you prefer a bath?" Clara asked, looking at me quizzically.

Gosh. She sounded just like a solicitous new wife. In my head, I could practically picture her with an apron on, a ladle in one hand, greeting her husband as he came through the front door after work.

And then she went on—

"Or will you have me instead?"

".....Uh?"

That made me blink a couple times.

Had I misheard her? Had my otakuism taken over so completely that I

had finally lost my tenuous grip on the distinction between fantasy and reality? Wait, did I just say any of that out loud?! Crap!

I was panicked but silent. Clara seemed to have her own interpretation of what this meant, because she put a hand to her clothing and...

"Just a—!"

Clara was already dressed in an outfit that would make a bikini look modest. Clearly it would take about two seconds to take off her clothes if she decided to...

"Cl—Clara...san...?!"

What was happening right now?! What was I *seeing*?

"Yes, Sire?" Clara answered demurely.

She didn't stop moving even as she spoke, though, unhesitatingly removing every scrap of cloth on her small body and letting it fall to the ground.

Whoa-oa-oa-oa-oa!

"Pardon me," Clara said (I didn't know if that was because she saw how flustered I was or not), and then she climbed onto my bed. On all fours. Like she was going to just crawl right on top of me.

"Ha-Hang on just a—*wait just a second!*" I cried, finally coming back to my senses.

God, that was close.

Not that this was my first experience with nearly being jumped by a girl with animal ears. Maybe that's why I was able to keep my head, or at least get it back eventually. If this was the first time it ever happened, I might have been swept up by circumstances and let *that* happen, or maybe *this*, like an animal myself.

A moment's sober reflection, however, revealed just how strange this all was.

Here I was, kidnapped by an enemy nation. And yet this beast girl, whom I had never met before, was perfectly happy and not the least bit embarrassed to jump into bed with me.

There had to be something behind it.

Calm down, Shinichi. You're in Kong Ming's trap! Not the actual Kong Ming, of course.

"Is something...?" Clara tilted her head in a gesture that looked totally innocent despite the fact that she was still practically on top of me.

What is the story *with this girl?!*

"Is... Is *this* what you meant by 'serving me'?!"

"This? Which?"

"I mean, you know, how do I put this... serving my... my lower half..."

As renowned as I was for my ability to say totally the wrong thing at the wrong time, even I couldn't bring myself to look a girl in the eye in a situation like this and use words like *sex* or *ecchi* or *getting' it on* or *unh! unh! ahh! ahh!* or [remainder of list omitted].

"Yes," Clara said with a confident nod. "There are three ways to make a man happy. Food, a bath, or interc—"

"La la la, I can't hear you!" I shouted, cutting her off before she could finish.

Girls are not supposed to use words like *sex* or *ecchi* or *making love* or *getting' it on* or *unh! unh! ahh! ahh!* or [remainder of list omitted]! It's just not right! It would shatter my all-too-fragile dreams!

I mean... Wait a minute. What is this, some kind of ero game?

"A-Anyway, maybe you could just kind of, uh, move aside for a moment?" I begged, unable to look directly at her. I knew my voice was about half an octave too high, and believe me, it was embarrassing. But I'm a healthy teenager! How was I supposed to stay calm under these circumstances?

Clara was crawling on top of me, naked as the day she was born. The difference in height meant her face was right in front of me—but that meant that if I moved my eyes even a little downward, her modest but developing swell would be completely visible, by which I mean, her pale skin and those small, pink... [redacted by author]

"Why?" Clara asked.

I couldn't help noticing how she looked down as she spoke. I followed her gaze and realized she was looking directly between my legs. Let's just say I wasn't getting any excuses from *that* part of my body. From that perspective, her question made a certain amount of sense. Ahhhh... I hardly understood what I was saying myself.

"Could it be," Clara asked with a hint of surprise, "that I am not to your liking, Sire?"

"No! You're very much to— er..."

I can go for pretty much any sort of moe character; I can be moe for just

about anything except the absolute most flash-in-the-pan fad stuff. But that's beside the point.

"So there's no problem, then." She moved so her face was right up next to mine.

"Th-There certainly is! Stop already!" Mustering every ounce of self-control that I possibly could, I pushed her away.

This was not the time to be getting swept up in my desires. For one thing, it might be a trap, but more importantly, if Clara was as young as she looked, getting involved with her could easily be against the law, or at least make me a total monster. I mean, granted, human laws didn't necessarily apply in alternate worlds.

But whatever, it was still wrong! It had to stop!

Anyway, this was where endurance would bear fruit! Be silent, O my kingdom! (Meaning unknown.)

As I fought my desperate struggle to be a gentleman, Clara seemed to be watching me with perplexity. By the way, I say "seemed to be" because I was battling to not actually look at her. Still, I could practically feel her gaze on me.

Finally...

"Is there some other to whom you've given your heart?" Clara asked.

"......Huh?" The sudden question left me at a loss. "Someone to whom I've...?"

Think who we were talking about here. The guy who was brutally shot down by his childhood friend and later went full home security guard.

How could I have given my heart to anyone?

Anyway, in the last year and a half, the only girls I had really talked to were Myusel, Petralka, Elvia, Minori-san—oh, and Cerise, Romilda, and some of the female students at school.

And yeah, Myusel especially gave me these shy smiles that were adorable, and just talking to her was a lot of fun. And the way Petralka would get all huffy if I teased her even a little was pretty cute. Minori-san had that baby face and those huge boobs, but when I talked to her, it turned out there was some real sweetness there.

As for Elvia, she was so scatterbrained and naïve that you would never take her for a spy, a very healing—

.....

.....

Uh, what were we talking about again?

“A-Anyway!” I tried to keep Clara’s hands from getting any closer, bending my head back far enough to see last week. “I swear I’m not looking, so just p-put your clothes on!”

“But...”

“And, uh, then I want you to make me something to eat. I’m starving!” I exclaimed, desperate for any way out of this situation.

And it was true that my stomach was feeling pretty empty. Thankfully, the moment I thought about it, my innards gave a convincing gurgle.

“...Very well,” Clara said with a nod.

With a tremendous effort, I continued to focus on anything but her as she climbed off the bed. When I could finally sense that she was dressed again, I let out a very complicated sigh.

Her Exalted Majesty the Empress, sitting on her throne, wore an expression that was darkness itself.

Empress Petralka an Eldant the Third.

Despite her lengthy name and imposing title, she was beautiful to behold—if I may risk sounding irreverent, she appeared quite sweet. Her silver hair was like a crown itself, well-kempt and lustrous, her eyes were like two great jewels, and her features were like those of a porcelain doll carved by the most sublime master. She seemed to have no flaws.

The sight of Her Majesty laughing happily is one of true elegance. But by the same token, when her face becomes clouded, she gives off such a gloom as to make it painful even to look at her.

The way she drummed her fingers on the armrest of her throne, I thought, indicated annoyance.

She didn’t speak.

The unpleasant pallor of her face was shared by the minister who stood beside her. He had the same silver hair as Her Majesty, but he was a handsome knight—Garius en Cordobal.

He didn’t speak, either.

Hardly able to bear the strain, I looked to the woman beside me for help.

Koganuma Minori-sama.

She was a female warrior from another country, one called Ja-pan. She was the woman charged with being my master’s bodyguard.

Her uncommon strength, though, belied her tremendous kindness; she was never harsh, but acted quite sympathetically, even toward a maid like me. I have no sisters, but I'm sure having an older sister must be like this. These thoughts possessed me for a few moments.

It so happens that Koganuma-sama and the others from Ja-pan give their names in the reverse order from the way we do, with their family names first. So really, it's most appropriate that I call her Koganuma-sama. But my master refers to her as "Minori-san" so much that I'm afraid it's begun to rub off on me.

Minori-sama was the third person not to speak; she didn't look any happier than the nobles in the room.

Normally, she would have smiled encouragingly and said something like "It'll be fine!" But right now, her face showed only anxiety.

This alone was enough to suggest that this was not a situation that warranted optimism.

I couldn't decide where to put my eyes, and so looked unhappily at the floor. But then—

"Minori. Myusel."

When Her Majesty said my name, I quickly straightened up.

She would normally be much too far above me to speak my name, let alone admit me into her audience chamber, although Her Majesty herself had encouraged me not to worry too much about any of that...

"We assume you are already aware of why we have summoned you here," Her Majesty said with a frown. "It is about Shinichi."

When the empress spoke that name, my heart both went cold and jumped at the same time.

Kanou Shinichi-sama.

My master...

He had come to the Eldant Empire from his far country of Ja-pan to do the work of spreading otaku culture. Because Japan lacked a noble class, he had no title to speak of. But he was a state guest of the Holy Eldant Empire and an ambassador, and so he was effectively to be treated as a noble.

And yet, he was tremendously kind to me, even though I was not just a commoner, but a much-reviled half-elf. The very fact that Her Majesty knew my name, indeed, would speak it aloud, really had to do with Shinichi-sama's good offices.

On any normal day, it would be Shinichi-sama, and not me, standing beside Minori-sama.

But Shinichi-sama was nowhere to be seen. In fact, at that moment, we had no idea where he was. Not me, not Minori-sama. And, it seemed, not Her Majesty or Minister Cordobal.

No one had seen Shinichi-sama anywhere since the previous morning.

Our gardener, Brooke-san, said he had seen Shinichi-sama going for a walk outside the mansion early in the morning. My master's taking a walk around the grounds wasn't especially unusual, so I had gone about making breakfast as normal and waited for Shinichi-sama to get home.

Except no matter how long I waited, he never did.

The time for him to go to school came and went, and when we still hadn't seen him by noon, we started to think that something strange was going on. I, along with Minori-sama, Brooke-san, Cerise-san, and Elvia-san, mounted a search for Shinichi-sama, but even though we looked til it was dark, we never found him.

Then the next day—that is, today—a bird-drawn carriage suddenly appeared at our mansion, and we were informed that Her Majesty was summoning me and Minori-sama.

A summons from the empress is not a thing to be ignored, no matter what may be going on. Minori-sama and I asked Brooke-san and the others to keep searching, while we went to Eldant Castle for this audience.

And so...

"Shinichi has been kidnapped."

"What...?" I couldn't restrain a gasp.

It was a moment before I could even understand what Her Majesty had said. I immediately slapped my hands over my mouth—far be it from me to be so rude as to doubt the words of the empress—but neither Her Majesty nor Minister Cordobal looked like they were angry with me. They looked, in fact, like they had far bigger things on their minds.

Minister Cordobal clarified what Her Majesty had said. "We aren't certain yet, but the possibility that he has been abducted seems very high."

Shinichi-sama... kidnapped?

But why? And by whom?

I was so shaken and confused that I could hardly put two thoughts together.

“Matoba reported to us that Shinichi hasn’t been seen since yesterday morning,” Her Majesty said. “If that were all, we might simply presume that old dunce was up to another of his tricks. But we have also received another report that is much harder to ignore.”

“What’s that?” Minori-sama asked.

It was Minister Cordobal who answered. “Bahairam. We had word that a secret unit from the Kingdom of Bahairam has been active in the area around the capital over the past several days. Ever since the incident with the puppet drake, reports like this have been on the rise... We assumed they were all related to this new weapon, the puppet drake. Exercises for a hot war.”

Even before our encounter with Elvia-san, it seemed that the Kingdom of Bahairam had been making small-scale incursions into Eldant territory, sending small numbers of spies or soldiers into the Empire. For the most part, though, they just seemed to want to find out what the domestic situation was. They had never shown any sign that they intended to make off with one of Her Majesty’s subjects.

Minister Cordobal, however, said, “We’ve received reports of people who appear to be Bahairamanian soldiers from several places throughout our territory. In addition, we recovered what appears to be a possession of one such soldier not far from Shinichi’s mansion.”

Then he showed us something: a small pendant.

I had spent just enough time in the military to recognize what it was. It was something Bahairam’s soldiers wore around their necks. It served as both personal identification and proof of their loyalty to their country. The front had simple letters on it, but on the back was carved the likeness of their king.

Her Majesty said, “It’s possible there was a struggle when Shinichi was taken, causing someone to drop this. Or perhaps it was deliberate, left behind to let us know they had him hostage, so that they could use him as leverage in negotiations. It’s not clear yet which is the case.”

But that would mean...

“There’s a third possibility. The commotion with the puppet drake may not have been chance. It may have been a diversion to set up this kidnapping.”

The puppet drake—a dragon with what appeared to be a magical spike

pounded into its head.

It was a type of magical weapon made in Bahairam, or so the rumors said, but we didn't yet know for sure. We had encountered the dragon through sheer accident. I watched with my own eyes as the military force from Minori-sama's world—the Jay Ess Dee Eff—brought it down.

We had assumed that the puppet drake was an experiment that had escaped from Bahairam and just happened to wander into the Eldant Empire and attack us. But on reflection, it was a fair distance from our border with Bahairam to the capital. Could a Bahairamanian force really have failed to recover the puppet drake before it reached us?

Was it possible that all of this was really part of a plan?

Or even...

"Even if we assume the Kingdom of Bahairam did this, why would they kidnap Shinichi-kun?" Minori-sama asked.

"I can't claim to understand what Bahairam might be thinking," Minister Cordobal replied. "But we haven't exactly gone out of our way to keep Shinichi secret. Anyone sniffing around our territory, trying to uncover recent goings-on, would hear his name soon enough. There's no telling whether they fully understand who he is and where he comes from, but they know they've captured someone important to our country, and that's enough."

He was right: Shinichi-sama had done all sorts of things here that had never been done anywhere before. The war had dragged on so long that even here in the capital, far from the fighting, people were starting to feel the fatigue. The otaku culture Shinichi-sama brought us, and all the various events that had come along with it, had given a new vibrancy not just to the capital, but to the entire nation.

Maybe that was what had attracted the attention of the Kingdom of Bahairam.

Actually, Elvia-san was a spy who had been sent to find out what was going on with Shinichi-sama. Not that she seemed to remember that.

"Minori," Her Majesty said to break the oppressive silence that had fallen upon us. "Could the Jay Ess Dee Eff not be dispatched?"

Slightly shocked, I stole a glance at Minori-sama beside me.

Of course. The Jay Ess Dee Eff.

They had defeated that dragon without losing a single soldier. Surely

rescuing Shinichi-sama would be easy work for them?

Despite our expectant gazes, though, Minori-sama lowered her eyes. “I’m afraid I... personally can’t say.”

Of course not. The Jay Ess Dee Eff was a military organization, after all. They couldn’t act without their superiors’ orders. Somebody—Matoba-sama? Minori-sama?—would probably have to take the matter back to Japan and confer with their ruler or prime minister or whoever held the power there. But that would take time.

“Of course...” Her Majesty said weakly. She sounded like she had half-expected this response.

Her Majesty next looked at Minister Cordobal. If the Jay Ess Dee Eff couldn’t do anything, then perhaps some Eldant soldiers could be sent...

But...

“Majesty. As I told you before, our country cannot send troops.”

“Garius...”

“We’ve lately achieved a sort of stalemate with Bahairam. There may be border skirmishes, but there haven’t been any large-scale battles. In fact, things are very nearly stable. Many of your most important ministers are suggesting we take this opportunity to advance the cause of peace with our neighbor.”

Her Majesty said nothing, but only bit her lip and stared at the floor. She was much too wise not to understand what Minister Cordobal was saying.

The Holy Eldant Empire and the Kingdom of Bahairam had been at war for quite some time, and both nations were tired of it. The last thing either of them wanted was for the war to get bigger or more intense. They might be an enemy country, but a careless provocation—or something that could easily be taken as provocation—would serve no one. It could all too easily spiral into a massive conflict.

“Further,” Minister Cordobal said, “Shinichi may be an important guest in our country, but he is not one of Your Majesty’s subjects.”

In other words, regardless of whether the Japanese army got involved, it would not make sense for the Eldant Empire to act on his behalf.

The Eldant Empire was a major power. That meant even the empress could not simply do whatever she wished. If her advisors all opposed her, even the imperial will could be thwarted.

“Yes, but... But...” Her Majesty stuttered for a moment, then fell silent.

Minister Cordobal did not look much happier than she did. My understanding was that he, too, had a fondness for Shinichi-sama. So although his words might sound heartless, they must have caused him great pain.

However...

I couldn't stop myself from asking, "What will become of Shinichi-sama, then?"

Every pair of eyes in the audience chamber, including Her Majesty's, focused on me. I instinctively shrank back, embarrassed at having overstepped myself. And yet, I had to speak. Otherwise, it seemed no one at all was going to help Shinichi-sama. And that...

"Does this mean Shinichi-sama won't ever be able to come home again...?"

"Myusel..."

Her Majesty spoke my name with such sadness.

I understood. It hurt her, too. Maybe even more than it did me. Because unlike me, Her Majesty had the power...

"Needless to say, we don't intend to twiddle our thumbs and do nothing," Minister Cordobal said. "I merely mean that overt military action is out of the question. Sending a goodwill ambassador or someone of the like to negotiate, that's a possibility. However..." The minister's beautiful eyebrows furrowed with pain. "That is only in the event that the Kingdom of Bahairam will admit that they kidnapped Shinichi."

I didn't say anything.

He was right. If Bahairam chose *not* to acknowledge that they were holding Shinichi-sama hostage, then there would be no way for the Holy Eldant Empire to get him back...

"In the meantime, we'll try to come up with some ideas, too," Minori-sama said.

"Yes, please. We'll keep you informed if we learn anything."

"Thank you very much. I wish you the best of luck."

Minori-sama bowed to Minister Cordobal, prompting me to hurriedly duck my head as well.

But still...

Master... Shinichi-sama...

Would the Jay Ess Dee Eff really help him? Japan had once considered

Shinichi-sama such a troublemaker that they attempted to kill him. Would such a country now send its armed forces into a foreign nation in order to rescue him?

This hardly seemed like the moment to voice my concerns, however. Minori-sama and I bowed once more to Her Majesty and Minister Cordobal and then exited the audience chamber, leaving only a heavy silence behind us.

Bathing cleans both the mind and soul, they say. And they're absolutely right.

"Ahhh..."

I slid down onto the stone bench and let out a relaxed sigh.

This place didn't look so much like a bath as it did a sauna. That is to say, there were no actual bathtubs. There were brick tiles instead, through which hot steam rose up from who knew where.

As rooms go, it was pretty big. I didn't exactly have a measuring tape with me, but I would guess the whole area was about ten mats.

It wasn't like the bath back at my mansion in the Eldant Empire. That had been more the sort of thing I was used to—you know, a tub with plenty of hot water. Maybe I was just encountering a cultural difference between the two countries.

I'd heard that there were even countries on Earth where, unlike Japan, which had plenty of water, there wasn't even a custom of using a bathtub. Some people, on seeing a large bathing area, might actually be a bit repulsed—maybe they couldn't bear the thought of using water others had already bathed in.

But anyway, none of that really matters.

"Hmm..."

What with this and that, it had already been three days since I was kidnapped and brought to Bahairam. I spent the first two days going over my room, trying to see if there was some way I could escape, but all I'd learned was that it was locked down so tight an ant couldn't have gotten in or out. The windows had bars over them, and the door to the room was

locked and couldn't be opened from the inside. I had pounded on it a couple of times, wondering if I might break it down, but I decided my chair was going to break first.

On that note, Clara was with me the entire time I was looking around my room, watching my every move. But she didn't say anything. I had assumed she was there primarily to keep an eye on me, but I saw her around twenty-four hours a day; she never left to report to anyone.

Could it be that she wasn't actually a citizen of Bahairam, but, like me, an abductee from somewhere else? Or maybe she was from this country but just especially low on the social ladder. There was always the distinct chance that in this world—which, let's remember, had effectively a Middle-Ages cultural level—slavery was still alive and well, too. If it was possible to buy human lives, how easy would it be to consider them disposable?

I had even considered a last-resort scenario in which I took Clara hostage in order to escape... but it didn't seem very hopeful.

As I was reviewing all this in my mind, I heard the door to the bathing area open.

"Pardon me," someone said.

I just about choked.

Wait. Hang on.

Look, I get it. This is *the* classic bath scene. The most venerable of tropes. But was it *really* happening?

As I sat there in the bathing area pretty much panicking, someone quietly approached, eyes downcast. It was, needless to say, Clara.

Once again, she was naked as a jaybird.

I mean not a *scrap* of clothing.

Her modest chest, her still-widening hips, and her... uh... the place where her legs met her torso were all more or less on full display. She didn't seem to have any thought of covering herself with a towel, but pattered toward me with only her hands to hide her chest.

"Okay... Wait...!"

I spun around on the bench as fast as I could, putting my back to her.

Not to brag, but I put the *L* in *loser*. Zero experience with the ladies, of course. I wasn't about to let out a "Woo-*hoo*! ♪" and drink in the sight of Clara's naked body.

"Pardon me," Clara repeated, and then she sat down on the bench next to

me. I could tell by the sound, and I could sense her there. I still kept my back to her, staring resolutely at the wall of the room. But then...

"Eeyikes!"

I found her arms wrapping around me toward my chest.

I felt something pressing up against my back. *Is it?! Was it?! Could it be?!*

No, they weren't large; in fact, they were quite slight, but they were perfectly soft, and I could feel them stimulating the nerves in my back—! *Boo... Booo... Boooooooo?! Boob... bo-ob... booooohh!*

As my language functions rapidly went haywire, Clara pressed herself up against me, embracing me from behind.

“W-W-Wai— Wait! Hold on!”

“...Okay,” Clara said, and obediently waited.

She waited, but that didn’t mean she gave me any more personal space. Hence, my galaxy was ecstasy faster than the speed of light. (Meaning unknown.)

“Look... Uh... Could you give me a little space?”

“Okay,” Clara said, and just as obediently backed away.

If nothing else, it looked like she was going to respect what I wanted—she wasn’t going to force, you know, *things* on me.

What exactly was going on here?

“C-Could you tell me what exactly is going on here?”

“I thought I might wash your honored back.”

“No, er... I mean, I’m very happy about that, but—”

“And that we might have relations after that.”

“I told you, no relations!”

I hadn’t meant to shout.

Clara was silent.

“Listen, it’s, er, I’m very and most humbly aware of what you’re exaltedly saying, but—”

This was no good. I had another bug in my system.

No, brain cells! We have to forge ahead!

We need a phat plan to get us out of this jam!

I’m not trying to brag, but this isn’t the first time that I, Kanou Shinichi, have been in a situation like this!

So I should be able to draw on my past experience and know exactly what to do!

Last time— Last time, I— err... What *did* I do?

Arrgh, it’s no good! Last time I got out of it with my purity intact because Myusel and Minori-san both showed up at the worst best moment, but this time it was just me and Clara...!

Come to think of it, I didn’t even get out of it by myself last time! Bad self! I’m disappointed in me!

Danger! Danger, Kanou Shinichi!

Come on, brain cells, think!

There’s got to be some reason—some reason not to do anything dirty...

“Ahem, er, um, there’s—there’s someone I’ve already set my—you

know, my heart on!"

"Is that so?"

"Very much so!" I said, my voice cracking a little.

Yes! That would do it. That would keep Clara from pushing me into anything! I should have realized when she asked me if I was turning her down because there was someone else in my heart that even in her worldview, they understood preserving one's chastity for the person you loved.

Perfect. Very logical.

I smiled in relief—until Clara began to speak in a quiet voice.

"In that case, you should set your heart on me instead."

"Ex*cuse* me?!"

If you could just change the object of your affections at the drop of a hat like that, you wouldn't be very "set" on that person, would you?!

More to the point, it really was absolutely time to clarify what in the world was going on here!

Were things going all adult here? Not-for-under-18s?!

"It doesn't matter, we just can't!" I nearly screamed.

Look, it's not that I wasn't totally eager for the plot to take an X-rated twist.

The problem was, this was the Kingdom of Bahairam. And I was their prisoner.

I didn't have a very solid grasp of what was going on, and my *gh**t* (er, maybe I should say my instinctive sense of caution) was whispering that one careless move could spell very bad things for me.

But then...

"Am I not to your liking, Sire?"

IS THAT **REALLY** *ANOTHER TROPE LINE?!*

Frankly, the whole "Don't you like me?" thing has been done to death in every manga and anime and light novel, not to mention this was the second time Clara had said it to me.

But this time she was saying it from so close that I could feel her breath tickle my ear as she whispered the words, and that hackneyed line became a force to be reckoned with.

"Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-That's not really what I meant...!" I said, backpedaling before I knew what I was doing.

I had a certain sense that just spitting, “Damn right, how could I ever get moe for someone like you?” would actually save me a fair amount of trouble in the long run, but I could also picture her simply responding, “Let me offer you someone else, then,” and bringing in somebody even more aggressive. And that would be a whole new problem.

But this was a problem, too. Damned if I did, damned if I didn’t. Surrounded on every side!

“Would you prefer a man, perhaps?”

“No! No! Definitely not!”

Through my mind flashed the image of a certain WAC’s head exploding —but as for my own head, I shook it vigorously. I wanted to make sure this particular message got across loud and clear: *no guys*. The last thing I wanted was for Clara to blandly slip away and send a man in her place, no matter how happy that might make Minori-san.

At that point in my thinking, I finally stopped and breathed a sigh.

How *was* everyone in Eldant doing? How did they feel about my disappearance? Was there an uproar? I would feel bad if I had caused them any distress.

Or had they been basically like, “Well, he *is* a former home security guard,” and not worried about it in the least? That was equally painful to imagine.

I have no way to communicate, and they won’t let me out of this house, so there’s nothing I can do.

The question remained, though: what exactly did Bahairam want with kidnapping me? I had tried asking Clara about it, but she just shook her head wordlessly and wouldn’t tell me anything. And as for Amatena, who seemed to be at least somewhat responsible for what was going on, I had only seen her the one time.

When I thought about kidnapping, the word that came to mind was definitely *ransom*.

But am I that valuable? ...was, er, a question I hoped nobody was asking.

The Japanese government had pretty much wanted to disappear me anyway, so it didn’t seem likely that they would shell out money to get me back. As for the Holy Eldant Empire, I might have been treated as a guest of state, but I wasn’t one of their subjects, so I didn’t expect them to pay for

me, either. If Bahairam was going to go to all the trouble of kidnapping somebody, why pick someone in such a precarious position as I was? The son or daughter of some noble family seemed more certain to get results.

That suggested the kidnapping had something to do with the work I was engaged in.

Otaku culture. The weapon of cultural invasion I and the Japanese had brought to this world.

"But... Does Bahairam...?"

It was true, Eldant had begun taking steps to export otaku culture itself. There had already been shipments to several other countries in the area, experiments to see what the reaction would be. But I was pretty sure none of them had gone to Bahairam, which was an enemy country, after all. Ah! But if they had spies like Elvia in Eldant, they had probably gotten at least some information on the subject.

"Sire?" Clara asked again.

Oops! I forgot. I had to deal with my little friend somehow.

"Um, right. Um. You see, I a-actually, you know, I'm all about girls, but I'm... I'm sick! It's a very bad, very rare illness, that, uh... it makes me die! If I, you know, do that kind of... thing."

I decided to just let my mouth do whatever it wanted. Part of me definitely wondered what the hell it was saying at that moment, but I had to come up with some kind of lie like this or they would just sic one girl after another on me, and things would only get more *whoa-whoa-whoa* with every new face.

But then...

"You are... sick, Sire?"

Apparently, Clara had bought my ruse.

"Yeah, sick! So if, you know... If I *do* anything with you, Clara, I'll die. And that would be bad for everyone. I think." I continued to let my mouth run the show as I attempted to escape from this honey trap. "You guys don't want me to die, do you? *You* don't want me to die, do you, Clara?"

"You're correct. That would be very problematic," Clara said.

"Well, er, then maybe you could leave me alone in the bath for now. Oh, hey, actually, I'm done! I'm out of here, so take your time!"

I worked my way out of the bathing area, turning my head painfully so as not to look at her, and headed for the changing room.

“Sire...”

Clara’s voice followed me, but I shut the door between the bath and the changing room. Then I slumped against it and let out a breath.

The inside of the mansion seemed dark and gloomy. Without the master, Shinichi-sama, at home, it felt like something was missing. And of course that was true, on some level, but it was more than that. It was like the color had gone out of everything; it was like the mixture of sadness and indolence you feel at twilight.

Brooke-san, Cerise-san, Elvia-san, and Minori-sama: nobody talked very much, and nobody looked very happy. I must admit that I’m not very good at reading the expressions of lizardmen like Brooke-san and Cerise-san, but their body language, the way their tongues moved, made it seem very much like they were feeling down.

I knew it was a little late for this, but all this brought home to me just what an important presence Shinichi-sama had been in all our lives.

I could hardly neglect my duties as maid just because Shinichi-sama was gone, though. In fact, it was my job to make sure the house was shipshape, so Shinichi-sama could come back at any time and find the place looking good. On top of that... Well, I was just a maid, and this was all I could do. And I had to do *something*, or I thought I would go mad with worry.

After breakfast was over, it was time for cleaning and laundry.

I took care of the laundry first. Things were mostly dry, and I was walking down the hallway with a basket and some rags.

“Shinichi-sama...”

I couldn’t stop his name from coming to my lips. No matter how many times I called him, though, he wouldn’t answer.

I thought the anxiety was going to crush me.

It was already five days since Shinichi-sama had gone missing. I hadn’t heard anything from Her Majesty or Minori-sama these past three days. That probably meant they hadn’t learned anything. Even our hypothesis that Shinichi-sama had been taken to the Kingdom of Bahairam wasn’t completely certain. And trying to find one single person without any kind of

clues was like grasping at clouds...

I let out another sigh. I'd lost count of how many times I had done that.

School was the same way: without Shinichi-sama, nothing could move forward. Minori-sama and I, the two remaining instructors, had told the students that they would be doing "free study" until further notice, and we hadn't been to school since then.

I was sure the students were all worried as well. Everyone so looked up to Shinichi-sama.

"Shinichi-sama..."

Are you hurt? What's happening to you now?

His face floated through my mind over and over, and each time I felt my chest tighten. It hurt.

I was walking along with my eyes on the ground when...

"Hm...?"

Suddenly I noticed: I could hear people talking.

It was coming from the living area. It sounded like it was probably Minori-sama and her superior, Matoba-sama. It had been quite a while since Matoba-sama had been here—I believe he had gone back to Japan to make a report.

Could it be...?

Would Japan send someone to rescue Shinichi-sama?

The Jay Ess Dee Eff couldn't act without orders from Japan's government. But that also meant that if the government so ordered, the Jay Ess Dee Eff could turn its strength—power enough to defeat a dragon—to helping my master.

That had to be why Matoba-sama had come back!

Holding that hope in my heart, I headed toward the living area.

"That's exactly why—!"

"But..."

I could only hear snatches of the conversation.

They were speaking Japanese. Of course, the rest of us in the house routinely heard Shinichi-sama and Minori-sama speaking this language. But our magic rings also simultaneously transformed it into the Eldant language, which enabled us to speak more readily with them.

At that moment, though, all I could hear was Japanese. That must have meant the two of them had taken off their rings. Deliberately, I suspected.

That anxiousness began to well up again.

I set the basket and rags on the ground where they would be out of the way, then pressed my back to the wall and listened hard to the words coming from the next room.

“So, you’re saying...?”

“That would..., yes. So...”

They were speaking quickly and using a lot of words I didn’t know, so I couldn’t follow everything they were saying. But then I heard Minori-sama shout, “You mean the Japanese government instigated Shinichi-kun’s kidnapping?!”

I caught my breath, feeling my heart skip what seemed to be several beats.

What had Minori-sama just said?

“Now, now, I’m not certain about that myself. I’m simply saying those above me rather seemed to... expect this. There have always been those who felt that restricting our engagement to the Eldant Empire alone was risky. Especially when the country’s empress seemed so taken with Shinichi-kun. Some have suggested he might be a twenty-first-century Rasputin or Dokyo.”

“That’s—”

“On top of that, the JSDF has been running escort missions for export shipments of otaku merchandise, has it not? And they know we defeated that dragon. In that light, it seems he was simply given the duty of approaching nations other than Eldant.”

“I wasn’t told!”

“You’re merely Shinichi-kun’s bodyguard. It didn’t concern you.”

“But sir—”

“I’m fairly confident it’s the Kingdom of Bahairam that’s behind this latest incident. I’m simply saying they might have been inspired by information passed to them by the Japanese government.”

“But why would the government...?”

“Well, without Shinichi-kun, they have the perfect excuse to send somebody new.”

“*That’s* what this is about?! A pretext?”

“Earlier events made clear how strongly the Eldant Empire would oppose any direct attempt by Japan to liquidate Shinichi-kun. An impolitic

move on our part could even lead to war. How much easier would it be if Shinichi-kun vanished by ‘accident,’ something unrelated to the Japanese government? A smooth transition of Amutech’s management would be quite readily achieved then.”

“That’s why they fed information to Bahairam?”

“I’m only saying it’s a possibility. I have no actual proof, nor was I personally told any of this. I do know, however, that the government has already prepared a successor. That’s much too quick if they only just learned about Shinichi-kun’s kidnapping.”

“.....Grr...”

“Whatever the case, the government is not going to move on this situation. Nor is the JSDF. And I doubt the Holy Eldant Empire will, either. That’s simply the way it is.”

The meaning of their conversation slowly sank in to me, spreading darkness through me like a poison as it did so. Yes, they were using difficult words and expressions that left me unable to understand everything they had said. But I understood enough.

Was it Japan’s fault that Shinichi-sama had been kidnapped?

With Shinichi-sama gone, would somebody new come?

It was more convenient for Japan that Shinichi-sama disappear, so they were deliberately going to hold back their army...

What would happen to Shinichi-sama, then?

Who would help him?

No one? Really—no one?

Would everyone, even his own country, abandon him?!

The thought was so terrible it made me dizzy. I stumbled a bit and accidentally kicked the basket of clothes I had set on the floor.

“Who’s there?!” Minori-sama demanded instantly.

And I—horrified and overwhelmed by everything that was going on, I simply ran for my life.

“Ohh...”

What should I do?

What should I do, what should I do, what should I do, what should I do what should I do what should I do...!

Anxiety—no, terror seized my insides.

Nobody was going to rescue Shinichi-sama.

Even Minori-sama couldn't help him.

So honestly... what would happen to him?

Would he never come back to us? Would somebody new come to replace him, like Matoba-sama said? And would I have to serve that new person?

Whoever they were, they wouldn't be Shinichi-sama.

"I couldn't bear that...!"

My vision went blurry... and then I fell.

I lay right there on the floor in the hallway.

"Shinichi-sama! Shinichi-samaaaa..."

Tears began pouring out of my eyes. I couldn't stop them.

A week passed in the blink of an eye.

The window still had bars over it. The door was still locked from the outside.

My room was large enough, and pretty well-appointed. I had an attached toilet and bath, and even what seemed to be a small kitchen. Three meals a day were delivered to me.

I had just about everything I could want—but practically speaking, I was still under house arrest.

Sure, I was a former home security guard and shut-in, so being shut up in my room for a week didn't bother me at all in principle. But back then, I'd had manga and games and light novels and anime DVDs to entertain me, plus I could sometimes figuratively "go outside" via the internet. Spending a week in a room without even one of those distractions left me with plenty of time to kill.

There was one thing in my room, though: Clara.

Clara, the serving girl with animal ears, an animal tail, and a seriously loli vibe. She may not have had the headdress, the apron, or the black dress, but she was effectively my maid.

A beast-girl maid!!

The crushing power of that combination is almost beyond the ability of words to describe.

True, she wasn't very expressive—or anyway, I didn't feel like I saw a lot of emotion from her—but if I thought of her as a *kuudere*, or one of those "weird girl" types, that could actually be seen as a positive.

Not to mention, not only was this girl doing the cooking and cleaning

for me, she even wanted to offer herself to me at night. If I asked, she would literally do anything I wanted without so much as a frown. Being cooped up with a maid like that... Well, it only leaves you with one thing to do, if you know what I mean.

"Sire— how— is— this?" Clara asked, speaking in rhythmic beats. "How— does— it— feel?"

"Mm, good," I replied in the same rhythm. The bed creaked in time underneath me.

"Really— really— good... Ah— mm— right— there—!"

"Like— this?!"

"Yes—! Ahhh...!"

It felt so good, I couldn't keep a sigh from slipping out.

"Oh... Oh man— Clara... You— said— you were— new to— this!"

"But— I— *am*—!"

"So— Sooo good—! You're— amazing!"

"Do you— mean it—?" Clara asked from where she knelt above me.

"Sire— it's so— hard—!"

"There! Mmm—!"

Her technique—I really couldn't believe she didn't have a lot of experience. I gasped again.

Above me, Clara started moving faster.

"Ooh! There...!"

"You mean— here—?"

"Yes! Ahhh...!"

.....

Er, well, you get the idea.

Clara was giving me massages on an almost daily basis.

"I just can't do anything about my shoulders and hips all by myself."

I lay on my stomach on the bed, my face turned to one side. Clara was astride me, her small, pale hands working the tension out of my muscles.

For the record, I was the one who taught her how to give a massage. First I gave her one, and then she gave me one.

I'm actually pretty good at giving massages, if I may say so myself. My parents are both desk jockeys, so they would often give me some pocket change in exchange for pounding their shoulders or the like. I learned about lots of different massage techniques in hopes of increasing my take even

further, and in the process I actually acquired some genuine skill.

So it was easy enough to teach Clara the basics.

“Ohh. You’re a lifesaver. That really feels great.”

When you spend all your time reading books or fiddling around on the computer, your shoulders naturally become tense. But I was still just a teenager and never paid it much mind, so it just kept getting worse and worse. Sure, I could ask somebody to rub my shoulders every once in a while, but it was all women in my house—it was a little awkward asking for a massage. I guess there was always Brooke, but if he misjudged his own strength, my shoulders might end up a lot worse than just stiff.

Yes—Clara was a girl, too. So why could I ask her for a massage when I couldn’t ask Myusel or the others? Admittedly, it was a little odd. My thought was, we weren’t actually, you know, *doing it*, but this was plenty close.

As these thoughts were running through my head...

“It’s me.”

There was a sudden knock at the door.

“I’m coming in.”

Without waiting for us to answer, white-haired Elvia—I mean, Amatena—strode into the room.

I know it’s impolite to keep confusing them. But seriously, they look so alike! Just change the hair color and you wouldn’t know which was which.

I noticed that Clara suddenly went stiff, then hastily jumped off me. I was a little bit surprised by her reaction. She was always so muted, almost emotionless, but now—

Guhuh?

As she got off the bed, I saw that her tail was standing straight up.

I thought I remembered that dogs wag their tails from side to side when they’re happy, but an erect tail means displeasure. Not sure about cats. Don’t their tails stand up when they’re having a good time?

Clara’s face was still the picture of reserve, but might she actually be happy to see Amatena?

Wait a second... Was this a yuri flag?

Even as the thought went through my head, I rolled over and sat up in bed.

“Er...”

There were more than a few questions I wanted to ask Amatena, but she started talking first.

“Kanou Shinichi. There’s something I want to show you, you vile pig.”

“Huh? Show me?”

“Correct. Make ready to go outside, immediately.”

“Make ready? Go outside?”

Since I had been locked up in here for a week, the clothes I’d arrived in had gone out to laundry; at the moment, I was dressed in something that looked like a local outfit. I had no real idea whether it was suitable for leaving my room, but I sort of guessed not. Should I change into something else to go out?

Hold on—*go out*?!

Amatena looked at me, her face identical to Elvia’s but without any of easygoing-ness. It didn’t look like they were planning to set me free or anything. She was going to take me somewhere else.

“Er... Do you guys happen to distinguish between indoor and outdoor clothes?”

“...Clara,” Amatena said. Maybe she thought there was no point in talking to me. “Help Kanou Shinichi get ready. You have your assignment.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Clara nodded sharply, still expressionless. I couldn’t help but notice, though, that her tail was still standing up. *But so what?* you may be wondering. I was pretty sure Clara had a thing for Amatena. Anyway, I sure hadn’t seen her tail stand up like that when she was with me... But setting aside the question of whether Clara preferred the flowery realm of yuri, it looked like I had made the right choice not laying a hand on her.

“I’ll be waiting outside,” Amatena said, and left the room.

Where were they planning to take me?

I finally had a chance to get out of this cage, but all I could feel in my chest was a nameless fear.

When everything was ready, I left the house and was hustled into a carriage that was waiting outside.

It looked like people here got around pretty much the same way they did

in the Eldant Empire. The difference was that the carriages here were pulled by giant lizards. Or, well, the impression they gave was more like dinosaurs. I mean tyrannosauruses or velociraptors—two-legged reptiles the size of cows. Two of them were attached to the carriage.

So it was dino-drawn carriages, not bird-drawn ones, in Bahairam.

Silence reigned in the cabin. Clara had stayed behind in the house where I had been captive; the only ones riding in the carriage were me and Amatena. The driver was a man who wore a military uniform like hers. There was no one else around. It didn't seem like much of a guard contingent for transporting an abductee.

Then again, if Amatena's physical capabilities were anything like Elvia's, stopping me if I tried to fight or run would be a piece of cake for her. Pretty much an entire cake, actually. It wasn't exactly impossible for a human to fight a beast person, but the odds were long.

Minori-san might have an actual shot, come to think of it, I reflected, the image of a certain brave WAC passing through my mind. We were talking about someone who had roundhouse-kicked a dragon, after all. She had told me she was the daughter of a dojo master and had been learning martial arts since she was very young. It's said that an excess of practice can make up for a dearth of talent. Anyway, I would hate to be the guy who thought he could get the jump on Minori-san just because she was so laid back. I bet that'd be over in one punch.

But anyway, setting that aside...

"So this is Bahairam?"

Until this point I had known the Kingdom of Bahairam only by name, with no real idea what kind of place it actually was. So long as I was living in the Holy Eldant Empire, it was just "a neighboring country" or "an enemy country" or "Elvia's homeland," and nothing more. But now, here I was.

"It's very..."

The scenery that rushed by outside the window of the dino-drawn carriage was unlike anything I'd seen in Eldant.

I mean, was this even really a city? Long, white, single-story buildings stood at regular intervals. They lined both sides of the street, all exactly alike. It was as if they had been mass-produced from a single mold and all put in place according to the same rules. It was practically the opposite of

the chaotic atmosphere of Eldant.

On top of that, even though it was almost noon, the place was eerily quiet; I didn't see anyone around.

"Very what?"

"Huh? Oh, uh... Very... neat. Organized." I chose my words carefully.

"I see," Amatena said with a small nod. But it took her a second.

Huh? Had she just hesitated over something?

Maybe it was just my imagination.

"It's true that this—Borfoi, the eastern city—is one of the newer urban developments in our nation. Naturally, some of the rural settlements remain in the old style—not so well manicured. But I trust that in time all of them will be converted to be like the capital and this city."

Amatena offered her explanation in a dispassionate tone.

I couldn't quite figure out what to say. ("I love how *dreary* it is! You would hardly believe anyone lives here!" Maybe not.) Instead I asked, "Where are we going?"

Amatena only glanced at me and said, "You'll know soon enough."

What's the word for this? Cold? Standoffish?

I sighed a little. Her face really did look exactly like Elvia's—and aside from minor physical differences and, of course, the color of her fur, so did the rest of her. Notwithstanding the white hair, ears, and tail, she was the spitting image of my resident artist. Actually, her skin was maybe just a little more pale, but you would practically have to see the two of them side by side to really notice it.

Anyway, my point is, they really super looked like each other.

And yet, Amatena's personality was pretty much the exact opposite of Elvia's. Elvia's face was practically locked into a gigantic, friendly smile by default—whereas Amatena hardly had any expression at all.

My entire experience of Bahairamanian people now consisted of Amatena, Clara, and Elvia, but still, the numbers made me wonder whether people from this country actually tended to be cool and expressionless like Amatena and Clara, with Elvia's outgoing nature being the exception.

We sat in silence. It was oddly uncomfortable being in the carriage with the sour beast person. I started to wish we would hurry up and get to wherever we were going.

I spent some time looking out the window as I ruminated.

“Huh?”

That’s when I heard something getting closer.

Some kind of lively noise.

Actually, I guess it wasn’t getting closer to us. Our carriage was probably getting closer to it.

At first, the sound of our vehicle drowned out the noise outside, and I couldn’t quite make out what it was, but as it got louder and louder, I realized it was the hubbub of cheering voices.

Cheering?

I poked my head out the window of the dino-drawn carriage, trying to ascertain the source of the sound.

Up ahead, I could see a massive building. It was much bigger than my mansion. Not as big as Eldant Castle, maybe, but that wasn’t saying much. It certainly dwarfed the flat buildings I had seen along the road on the way here.

What was more, this building alone had a very unique architecture. It had a very traditional-looking, elaborate exterior, with lots of flowing curves. In fact, it made me think of...

“A temple?”

Yes. It definitely gave the impression of being some kind of religious building.

And in the square in front of it stood hundreds, maybe even more than a thousand, people, all cheering and shouting. The crowd seemed to be composed of several different races, with humans representing the majority, then beast people.

But I whispered my next observation:

“Everyone’s dressed the same.”

The people there were all wearing simple outfits—less than simple, really. From the material to the style, the staggering difference from what Amatena was wearing was inescapable.

I didn’t say anything, but I was starting to get, as they say, a bad feeling about this.

Let’s review: on the one hand, we had a town full of extremely simple buildings and a crowd of people in extremely simple clothes. On the other, we had one very ostentatious temple and a minder in a military uniform that seemed to have come from another world from what everyone else was

wearing.

This was more than a difference in social class. This was...

But even as I sat there fretting and arguing with myself, the dino-drawn carriage dino-drew closer to the temple.

Then suddenly, a short distance from the crowd, it stopped. Everyone appeared focused on the temple, so no one seemed to notice our arrival.

"All right, get out."

"Er, right."

I got out of the carriage to discover the road surface wasn't paved. That would explain why the ride quality had been so poor. I can only speak for the area around the capital, but back in Eldant, most of the main roads had basic paving, being lined with flagstones in most of the major areas. It suggested that Eldant was ahead as far as urban infrastructure was concerned.

Then again, since this wasn't Bahairam's capital city, it might be best not to compare the two.

Then I noticed something.

"Huh...?"

Right smack on the front of the temple, and up a little.

There was a balcony that looked down over the crowd.

And there was a man standing on the balcony. Er, well, maybe the word "man" doesn't give the most precise impression. Strictly speaking, he was a white-haired old dude.

Below the mustache that covered his upper lip floated a smile; he waved magnanimously to the people gathered below. He threw back his cape: the clothes beneath were classy enough to make him look like some sort of noble.

Like the temple itself, he definitely stood out from his surroundings.

"*Father*!"

"*...Father*?"

I wrinkled my brow when I heard the shout. Father? Who? That guy on the balcony?

What, did he have a son or daughter somewhere in the crowd?

I scanned the assembled people, but everyone had the same smile on their face, all of them waving back at the man up above. I heard the shout of "Father" repeated several times.

Maybe I was mishearing something? Not likely. I had my magic ring to translate for me telepathically, so I didn't run the risk of just misunderstanding a letter or something. They weren't saying "bother" or "flounder" or whatever.

But I was also pretty sure this entire crowd wasn't composed entirely of the biological children of that man on the balcony.

Actually...

Now that I thought about it, I noticed that I couldn't understand the vast majority of what the crowd was shouting. That meant most of the people there weren't wearing magic interpreter rings, or whatever served that function here in Bahairam. I recalled that even in the Eldant Empire, only people above a certain social station were apt to have the rings. It was just that I spent so much of my time with people who wore them that I had almost forgotten.

For what it was worth, I had actually learned a bit of the Eldant language myself, but I didn't understand the bulk of what I was hearing now. That suggested the people of Bahairam spoke a different language. Some facets of the pronunciation sounded similar, almost like a very thick accent instead of a separate language, but the niceties were lost on me.

"He is our honored father-ruler," Amatena said, as if she could see what I was thinking. "Although I believe in other lands you know him simply as the King of Bahairam."

I caught my breath and hurriedly took another look at the old man on the balcony.

That was the King of Bahairam?!

But why was he...?

"Our father-ruler makes occasional tours of his kingdom. When he does so, he does us, his children, the honor of letting us see him. This morning he has been so kind as to come to this eastern city."

"Huh..."

"Father-ruler" and "children," huh?

So in this country, the king was literally seen as "father of the people." And the citizens, I supposed, were all seen to be equals as his children.

"Amatena... Is this what you wanted to show me?"

I looked over at the "children" and the temple and the "father-ruler."

I understood that the man was the King of Bahairam, but what was the

point of just showing him to me? Surely, she didn't think I would be moved to tears, fall to my knees, the moment I saw him? She couldn't be that deluded.

Just for an instant, I thought maybe I was going to be taken to meet him. But if so, why stop outside the temple to look at him? I assumed I would have to go inside to meet him. Or was Amatena trying to give me a sense of how much the people in this country adored their leader?

But then again...

For a king, this seems...

...surprisingly sparsely attended.

I know it might sound strange to refer to a crowd that I said might top a thousand people as small, but we were talking about the king, here. Admittedly, I didn't know what the population density of Bahairam was, let alone this specific part of the country, but wouldn't you expect tens of thousands to turn out to get a glimpse of the royal visage? Heck, we get tens of thousands just for Comiket. Compared to that, this was a little underwhelming. Although to be fair, people come from all over the country for Comiket.

"What...?"

My thoughts were interrupted by a piece of paper Amatena suddenly thrust out in front of me.

Her face showed no expression; she just stood there with the paper outstretched, not saying anything. The sheet was folded over—was she telling me to open it and take a look?

I took the paper hesitantly and unfolded it.

"Huh?"

On it, I saw something very unexpected: Petralka.

It was the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire, looking extra moe in her adorable magical-girl outfit, striking a pose and smiling straight at the viewer.

It was her, or rather, a picture of her. What was this, some kind of publicity photo?

No, when I looked closer, I realized that although it was photo-quality, this was an illustration.

I suspected it was a colored woodblock print. True, the school had a color copier and color printer, but the students couldn't use them without

permission. It was similar with photos. I couldn’t imagine someone had been making and selling something like that without me hearing about it. More likely, someone in the capital had taken it upon themselves to produce this image.

Not long before, we'd made a movie featuring Petralka as a magical girl. It had actually started as a cover-up for a flub on the part of the Japanese government, but we got so into it that we ended up completing the film (however crude it was) and then showing it both at Eldant Castle and at several sites around the city.

And boy, did it take off with the populace.

We never expected Her Majesty's popularity to shoot up the way it did. Petralka herself was profoundly embarrassed by the film, but it resulted in her subjects adoring her as a person as well as an empress.

"We demand that you do something just like this," Amatena said.

"Like this?" I asked, frowning.

Was Bahairam ordering me to produce a movie? Or just portrait pictures like this one? It didn't really matter, because I didn't have the equipment to make a movie, and the technology for producing prints like this had been around since long before I had.

Either way, kidnapping me wasn't looking very useful.

"Here," Amatena said, thrusting another piece of paper at me. This one depicted a bearded man in fancy clothes.

It took me a second, but the beard clued me in: it was the King of Bahairam. They had prettied him up so much in this picture that I almost didn't recognize him, but I thought this was intended to be a portrait of the nation's ruler. This, too, looked like a colored woodblock print; like the one of Petralka, it was extremely realistic, but if you looked closely, you could see it wasn't a photograph.

I stared silently at one picture, then the other.

So Amatena was saying...

"You want me to turn this guy into a magical girl?"

An image passed through my mind of the "father-ruler" in a frilly miniskirt and knee-high socks, holding a stick and winking as he exclaimed, "That was a big meowstake!☆" Not forgetting the flirty pose, of course.

.....

.....

Urgh.

"No." Amatena shook her head as I battled a wave of nausea.

"Thank goodness. Obviously, I guess. Why would you need something like that?"

Granted, there was probably a deeper question than one of necessity.

But wait... Could it work as a gag?!

Around and around went my irreverent thoughts.

“Kanou Shinichi,” Amatena said, staring me full in the face, “you did something that caused Petralka an Eldant III’s popularity in the Eldant Empire to increase dramatically.”

“Huh? Er, yeah, I guess.”

I guess that was me, wasn’t it? Yeah, okay, it was. I think it’s a good thing for an administrator to be popular with the people.

“You will do the same thing for our country.”

“I’m sorry...?”

“You will use your abilities to make the children many times more loyal to the father-ruler. They will work harder for him, fight harder for him, and be more overjoyed to do so.”

“.....Huh?”

This request was sort of kitty-corner from what I’d been imagining, and all I could respond with was a vacant grunt. It was drowned out by the shouting and cheering, though, and I wasn’t sure Amatena even heard me.

Chapter Two: The Country Called Bahairam

I was all too aware that my hands were trembling.

“Please, don’t move...”

The object I was holding was unquestionably a weapon.

Of course, this wasn’t the first time I had held a weapon. In order to gain citizenship, I had spent some time in the imperial army of the Holy Eldant Empire, where I had learned how to use the sword and the spear, in addition to offensive magic.

But the lump of metal in my hands at that moment was something else entirely.

This was a weapon from the country of Ja-pan. I believed I had heard Minori-sama refer to it as a “nine milli-meter hand-gun.”

“Myu... Myusel?” Elvia-san watched me dimly. Her usual cheerful smile was gone. Instead, I saw her face harden as the situation dawned on her. Her tail stood straight up against her back, motionless, perhaps from alarm.

She understood that a careless move could get her killed.

Living under the same roof had given us ample opportunity to see Minori-sama’s various tools in action. I was sure the nature of this weapon wasn’t lost on Elvia-san.

I had purposely taken Minori-sama’s nine milli-meter hand-gun because without it, I had no leverage against a werewolf. Elvia-san was stronger and faster than me; I would never have been able to defeat her with a bladed weapon. I could have tried magic, but chanting and targeting would have given away what I was doing, and my spell would have been simple enough to evade. Moreover, Elvia-san would have been just as aware of this as I was, and she wouldn’t have been intimidated by my threats.

So as bad as I felt about it, I had snuck into Minori-sama’s room and borrowed her nine milli-meter hand-gun. In addition to the one she normally carried on her person, she had a spare that I knew she kept in her

room.

“Q-Quit it already,” Elvia-san said, frowning. “Th-That’s Minori-sama’s, innit? Wont’cha get in trouble for taking it?”

Trouble. Yes, that seemed likely. There was every chance this wouldn’t end with a simple scolding.

At that moment, however, it was my only choice... My only hope.

“I’m begging you, Elvia-san.” My voice shook as violently as my hands.

Yes, I had been in the military, but I had no experience of actual combat. I had never personally confronted anyone with weapon in hand.

On top of that, a nine milli-meter hand-gun was different from a sword. According to what I had heard, there was no need to swing this weapon. In fact, all you had to do was move your finger a little bit, and it would push your opponent with a force vastly quicker and more powerful than a blade. If it impacted any vital point—the head or the throat, or even the heart—its killing power was much greater than a sword. With this weapon, it wasn’t possible to hold back or to temper one’s attack.

“This is... This is the only way...”

“Myusel!”

I heard someone call my name from the door of the room. I didn’t have to look back to know it was Minori-sama. No—I heard two sets of footsteps, so it was likely that Matoba-sama was with her. Brooke-san or Cerise-san would have sounded different.

I could hear both Minori-sama and Matoba-sama drawing in their breath. I have good hearing—my long elven ears aren’t just for show.

“Stop this right now! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Minori-sama! Matoba-sama! Stay back!” In an attempt to force them to keep their distance, I stretched out my arm so that the nine milli-meter hand-gun was just inches from Elvia-san’s nose.

“Eeeep!”

“If you come any closer, I’ll... I’ll...”

“St-Stoppit!” Elvia-san yelped.

The footsteps ceased. Minori-sama and Matoba-sama must have frozen in place.

“Elvia-san, I’m begging you,” I said again. “Take me to Bahairam!”

I could practically feel the shock from Minori-sama.

“T-To Bahairam?” Elvia-san asked, wide-eyed.

Was my request really that surprising? Didn’t everyone realize that this was the only way left to rescue Shinichi-sama? Neither Ja-pan nor the Eldant Empire was going to do anything for him. Minori-sama and Her Majesty both found their hands tied in respect of their positions. If anyone was going to volunteer to rescue Shinichi-sama, it would have to be me.

It had to be Shinichi-sama.

It couldn’t be some replacement for him.

Otaku culture had spread as successfully as it had because of Shinichi-sama. He was the one who had built the school, taught us soccer, and helped us make a moo-vee.

Shinichi-sama was the reason all of us were able to live and work together: Her Majesty; Elvia-san, the former spy from Bahairam; Minori-sama; Brooke-san and Cerise-san; all the people from the Jay Ess Dee Eff; everyone at the school; and even me.

“You must know how to get into the country, Elvia-san.”

After all, that was where she had come from, wasn’t it? As a spy? That meant she had to have crossed the border between the Kingdom of

Bahairam and the Eldant Empire without being caught by the border patrols. She must know about a secret path, a hidden route, something. And of course, she would have to be acquainted with the geography of Bahairam.

The past several days, Elvia-san had looked noticeably different from before. She kept sighing during meal times and was visibly upset. When she didn't have anything else to do, she shut herself up in her room and wouldn't come out.

I assumed this was because it was Bahairam that had kidnapped Shinichi-sama. Elvia-san was a spy from that nation, but she was also Shinichi-sama's artist-in-residence. Shinichi-sama had saved her life. Now the country of her birth had kidnapped the person she owed her life to. It had to be an uncomfortable position.

But it was no guarantee that she would work with me.

What if I asked and she refused?

Helping me when she knew I was going to go rescue Shinichi-sama would be tantamount to betraying her own country. And although I was sure she felt a debt to Shinichi-sama, did it run deep enough to cause her to set aside her national loyalties? I didn't know. I couldn't be sure.

And that was why...

"Er... I..."

"You must know by now that they say it was Bahairam that captured Shinichi-sama." I looked Elvia-san straight in the eye. "And there's no one left to help him except me!" Anxiety made my voice crack.

I sounded awful, and I was sure I didn't look any better. It was about more than how my face looked with a mask of anxiety on it. I was standing there threatening a friend who lived in my own home with a weapon.

But I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Ja-pan won't help Shinichi-sama, and neither will the Holy Eldant Empire! If no one at all is going to rescue him, then this is the only way...!"

"Myusel..."

It wasn't just fear on Elvia-san's face. There was concern there, too. Part of me felt guilty. What was I doing?

And yet...

"Myusel." Minori-sama's voice was more sure. "Let me ask you something. Did you pull the slyde and put the first bullette into the

chaymber?”

“What...?” I hardly understood half the words she had said.

She pressed further: “A nine-millimeter doesn’t have a hand-operated sayfety, so as long as there’s a round in the chaymber, it’ll fire with a pull of the trigger. But it doesn’t look to me like you’ve got the hanmer cocked. You have to pull the slyde and chamber the bullette, or you can pull the trigger all day and never shoot a thing. I really doubt you’ve used the decocker, right? So if you don’t have the hanmer down, there’s a pretty good chance you don’t have the slyde in place, either.”

“I... What...?”

What in the world was she talking about?

“For that matter, Myusel, did you even put bullettes in it? I’m pretty sure I left the magazeen in the spare empty.”

“Er... Yes?”

I was completely flummoxed.

Almost before I knew what was happening, Minori-sama had closed distance with me and plucked the weapon out of my hand.

“Oh...!”

“Eep!” Elvia-san flopped to the ground.

Minori-sama flipped the nine milli-meter hand-gun around in her hand and said in exasperation, “I knew it. Look. It doesn’t even have a magazyne in it!”

“Er... Um...”

“Myusel.” Matoba-sama, who had been silent until that moment, spoke. “I suppose you overheard us talking the other day.”

I didn’t react.

“How careless of me. I forgot you could understand some Japanese.” He sighed. “How much did you hear?”

“You said it was Ja-pan’s fault that Shinichi-sama was kidnapped. That somebody new was going to come to replace him...”

“What?” Elvia-san said with surprise.

Of course she was surprised. She knew that Bahairam had kidnapped Shinichi-sama, but even Her Majesty didn’t know that Ja-pan was behind it.

“So you said Shinichi-sama was going to be abandoned... And that means the only choice left is for me to go.” This was the conclusion I had come to after three days of agonized thinking. “I’m... I’m the only one who

can, aren't I?!"

I was surprised to find myself shouting, but Minori-sama remained calm to the end as she asked, "And you planned to make Elvia be your guide?"

"...Yes."

At this point, I saw nothing to do but be honest.

"I'm truly sorry," I said, looking at Elvia-san, Minori-sama, and Matoba-sama in turn. "I won't... I won't trouble you any further."

"What...?" Minori-sama looked taken aback by this.

"I'll go alone."

"Huh? Hold on— Myusel!"

"It's been an honor serving all of you..."

I bowed my head, then made to walk out of the room.

Eldant and Bahairam shared a land border with each other. True, that border was ringed with treacherous mountains, but if I made sure to have plenty of food and equipment ready, I had faith that I could make it across them. I would need a weapon, too, in case soldiers from one nation or the other found me. In my head, I already had a list of everything I would need...

"Myusel, I demand that you wait," Minori-sama said, grasping my shoulder.

"Please, don't stop me."

"All I'm saying is wait!" Minori-sama sighed, then said, "Because I'm going, too."

"What...?" I turned to her, shocked.

Minori-sama was wearing a thin smile. "I'm... part of the reason Shinichi-kun was captured."

"Minori-sama? But you—"

"I was supposed to be his bodyguard."

"But... But that's..."

It was the job the nation of Ja-pan had charged her with. And now that nation wanted Shinichi-sama forgotten. Minori-sama had no more business protecting him.

"Listen. I haven't been given any orders yet relieving me of my duties as his bodyguard." Minori-sama shrugged. "Right, Matoba-san?"

"I suppose so. It makes a nice pretext, anyway." The old man was smirking.

And that meant...

“Minori-sama...”

“Yeah.” She gave me a firm nod. “Let’s go get him. Together.”

Ahh...! I felt myself shake with happiness. Minori-sama was on Shinichi-sama’s side. She would go to Bahairam with me. That made me feel ten times, a hundred times braver.

“But...” Still smiling, Minori-sama pulled out the hand-gun. Not the one she had taken from me, but the one she always kept at her hip. As if it were the most natural thing in the world, she leveled it at Elvia-san, who was still sitting on the ground.

“Guh?!” Elvia-san said, trembling.

“You’re right. We’re going to need a guide.”

Elvia-san made a choked sound, her tail standing on end.

“I think you had the right idea, coming to Elvia. Given the rumor that Shinichi-kun was kidnapped by Bahairam, she was the first person I thought of, too.”

“I—I swear I didn’t have anything to do with this!”

“Sure, I know that.”

Elvia-san tried to back up, but found the wall immediately behind her, cutting her off. Minori-sama crouched down in front of her. There was a click, and she stuck the hand-gun squarely in Elvia-san’s face.

“Help us, Elvia. I’m begging you.”

“B-Begging, nothing!”

She didn’t look convinced. Maybe she was hung up on the fact that helping us would mean betraying her country.

“Myusel and I don’t know anything about Bahairam’s geography. You came here as a spy—that has to mean there’s a way to sneak in and out, right? A way to cross the border without too much fuss?”

“W-Well, that’s—”

“Are you saying you don’t want to help us?”

“I’m telling you, it’s—”

“You don’t want to help Shinichi-kun?”

“It’s... It’s...” Her eyes were swimming by this point.

“Hmm.” Minori-sama tilted her head. “I see. Bahairam matters more to you than Shinichi-kun, doesn’t it? No other choice, then. You’re a Bahairamanian spy, aren’t you, Elvia?”

“Y-Yes... But...”

“Ah. So you admit it.” Minori-sama’s glasses glinted eerily.

Elvia-san shook violently.

True, it was an open secret among all of us that she was a spy from Bahairam, but for the time being she had been granted a stay of execution, the excuse being that there wasn’t enough solid evidence to convict her.

But now...

“You’ve just admitted that you’re a spy from Bahairam. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“Er... Agh...”

“Sadly, Elvia, you’ll have to be executed.”

Elvia-san’s face went pale. In the space of a few words, Minori-sama had completely cornered her. From my perspective, sticking a hand-gun in her face seemed to make the attempt at rational persuasion redundant, but what did I know?

“Oh, but... you’re a girl, Elvia. So who *knows* what they might do to you before they kill you? ‘She’s gonna die all the same!’, they’ll say, and then they’ll have their fun.”

“What... What kind of fun will they have...?”

“*Eyteenandup dohjinshi* stuff, you know? I can hardly bring myself to describe it! Just imagine, a bunch of hardened soldiers... *very* hardened...”

Elvia-san trembled again. I wasn’t sure what *eyteenandup dohjinshi* was, and I didn’t think Elvia-san knew either, but the thrust of what Minori-sama was saying was still perfectly clear.

“I’m really sorry, Elvia. I want to cover for you, believe me—but you’ve got to give me something to work with. Something I can present to Her Majesty and Minister Cordobal, something so compelling that they’ll have no choice but to forgive you even when they find out you’re an enemy spy!”

Elvia-san hung her head, exhausted by the fear. She spent a moment groaning unhappily before she finally said, “Yeah, fine...”

“Hm? What was that?” Minori-sama said, cocking her head.

Elvia-san gave Minori-sama a scathing look and shouted, “I said, fine! You win.”

I sat in a chair at my desk with my chin resting on my hand and let out a very long sigh. Amatena’s words from the day before kept whirling around

in my head.

"You will use your abilities to make the children many times more loyal to the father-ruler. They will work harder for him, fight harder for him, and be more overjoyed to do so."

That, apparently, was why the Kingdom of Bahairam had kidnapped me. Spies in the Holy Eldant Empire must have passed Amatena and her friends word of the movie we had made. They heard just how much people's estimation of Petralka—their "loyalty," to use Amatena's term—had gone up after the film premiered, and they were bent on doing the same thing for their own monarch.

In short, Amatena and whoever she was working for believed the movie had been a ploy to manipulate the populace.

That was one serious misunderstanding, I thought. It had never been our plan for Petralka to become a pop star; that was mostly sheer dumb luck. It was never the stated goal. But then, strictly in terms of the outcome, the movie had indeed turned out to serve that purpose.

To an absolute monarchy like Bahairam (not that the Eldant Empire was any different in this regard), that probably looked like a pretty effective political tool.

"Oh, for...!"

But, come on. *Do the same thing here*? It wasn't that easy.

For starters, this place didn't even have the equipment to make a movie. To be fair, Amatena and her superiors didn't seem hung up on the idea of a film as such. As long as the King of Bahairam—their beloved "father"—grew more popular with the people, it didn't really matter what I did.

For example, I could take a page from certain countries and religions in our own world, where people sometimes made up stories out of whole cloth in order to bring power to a head of state or religious leader. Anything from "he deflected lightning with his bare hands" or "he predicted an earthquake," right up to "he spoke with august figures from the past across time and space, and they acknowledged him" or "he's the bodily reincarnation of the soul of so-and-so."

Ridiculous propaganda like that wasn't exactly uncommon even back on Earth. Plenty of national founding myths and legends were basically attempts in their own time to control people or consolidate power. That might explain why, unlike most folktales, so many of these stories are

concerned with bloodlines and the legitimacy of those lineages.

My point is, what I was being asked to do was nothing new. But that still left me wondering:

"What the heck am I gonna do?"

Problem one: I was more of a messenger than a creator. Making up stories has never been my strong suit.

Problem two:

"Pardon me, Sire."

I heard the words through the door—not the door to the outside that Amatena always came through, but the one that led into the kitchen and bathing areas. That door wasn't locked.

"I've brought your tea."

It was Clara.

"Sure, come on in." I stood and opened the door for her. Clara was standing there with a tray in her hands and a surprised look on her face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said after a moment. She shook her head and came into the room.

I remembered, then: I had gotten the same reaction from Myusel once.

She seemed to be surprised that I had gone to the trouble of standing up and opening the door for her. Social differences were pretty pronounced in this world, and social superiors rarely showed that kind of consideration for their social inferiors. Bahairam touted how all its citizens were equal, but even just looking at the difference in clothes between the average citizen and members of the military suggested that equality only went so far.

"Here you are."

"Thanks."

On my desk she set a brass teapot and cup, along with a baked treat like a cookie. The tea must have been freshly steeped, because it was still steaming, and the cookie must have been freshly baked, because its aroma was still rich and tempting.

And yet, I didn't feel like touching them. I just couldn't seem to summon up an appetite. I was too worried about what Amatena had said.

"It's something the matter, Sire?"

"Er, ah, no... I just... I guess I'm not that hungry." Then I quickly added, "Oh, but I'm happy you took the trouble to bring them by."

Clara was silent. She looked confused again. The whole beast-girl thing probably amplified just how outrageously cute and moe the expression was, like a delicate bird or a tiny squirrel. But forget about that.

"If you are pleased, Sire, then that is good," Clara said. "Since I can't serve you by having relations with you, I must find other ways to make you happy, or consider myself to have failed in my duties."

"Uh-huh..."

I couldn't help feeling a little exasperated. Why was this girl so hung up on "relations"? Clara was currently under the impression that I suffered from If-I-Do-Dirty-Stuff-With-Girls-I'll-Die Syndrome (note: that name hasn't been vetted by the medical journals), so for the time being I had avoided any more being jumped on or gotten naked with.

But Clara believed that if she couldn't "serve" me that way, she had to discover some other way to earn my goodwill, and she had been very assiduous about doing so.

It felt different, though, from Myusel's cheerful devotion. Myusel worked hard on my behalf because she personally recognized me as her master—her actions showed it, and she had even told me as much herself. But with Clara, there was something dutiful about it, like she was doing it because she had no other choice. In extreme terms, you could say there was no feeling in it, that the way she did things was kind of mechanical. Not enough to make her seem unhappy, exactly, but she didn't seem to have any particular affection for me, either.

All the more reason, I figured, why I really wanted to avoid doing *it* with her.

"Look, Clara," I said, looking her square in the face. "You don't especially like me, do you?"

I succeeded only in provoking another perplexed expression.

"I mean... You know." I hesitated for a moment. "These... relations, or whatever. Do you have any experience with them?"

"I do not. Do you find that unsatisfying about me, Shinichi-sama?" She cocked her head as if to ask whether I might prefer a woman with lots of experience.

"No, look, that's not my point. If you don't have any experience, then... then I think it's even more important that you do, you know, kissing and stuff... with someone you really care about."

“Is that how things are in Eldant?”

“Wait, what do you mean by...”

“Are you saying that isn’t how things are here?!” I wanted to exclaim, but somehow resisted. Cultural differences could really be... well, different. Maybe in Bahairam, this sort of, er, stuff didn’t have anything to do with love. I’ve heard that in prewar Japan, marriage partners were usually chosen for you by the people around you, and sometimes you wouldn’t even see your partner’s face until the day of the wedding.

“Do you hate me, Shinichi-sama?”

“No, listen, that’s not really what I’m saying. I’m asking how *you* feel. You’re not exactly in love with me, are you?”

When Amatena walked into the room, Clara’s tail stood straight up. But when she was with me, it dangled listlessly behind her. Of course, it was always possible that unlike with some animals, her tail didn’t really say anything about her emotional state. But still...

“So I just have to wonder. What makes you so interested in ‘relations’ with me?”

As though it were blindingly obvious, Clara replied, “Because that is my duty. I have been told to please you, Sire, and to earn your exalted affections.”

I was struck dumb. In doujinshi and stuff, two-dimensional maids offer to “serve” their “Sires” at night all the time—but those are just stories. Fiction. Not reality. That’s why it works. And yet here was an actual girl right in front of me saying this stuff, and it turned out to be a complete turn-off. At any rate, it definitely didn’t make me eager to be all, “Well, then!” and just climb on.

I guess because that would mean...

“It would mean completely ignoring the girl’s feelings, wouldn’t it?”

Now Clara looked more confused than ever.

I know: some people in the world choose to do this sort of thing for work, of their own volition, and if it’s their choice then I leave that to them. But Clara didn’t strike me as being in that category. More likely, she had just been brought up this way. That was why she believed that when it came to sex, the feelings of the people involved didn’t matter. Or at least, *her* feelings didn’t. It was her job, nothing more and nothing less. That was why she had thrown herself on me over my objections, all the while saying that

it was in order to please me.

This was one more reason why I couldn't accept Amatena's demand.

The way that town had looked. Those people. Even that king. And now, the way Clara thought like this. What could produce any of that but a straightlaced, closely controlled society?

People were raised to suppress their natural emotions; even the blossoming of love wasn't permitted. They were simply supposed to be good little cogs of the state. They had to repress everything they felt, channeling it into "loyalty" and "patriotism." And as a result, the people didn't even realize how constricted their worldview really was...

Maybe individualism wasn't something they knew about in Bahairam.

In this country of all places, Amatena wanted me to help them manipulate the populace even more thoroughly.

And I just couldn't do it.

To me it was even worse, even more inhuman, than being made an accomplice to cultural invasion.

I sat there, my brow furrowed with all these thoughts, when—

"It's me."

There was a knock on the door, and I heard Amatena on the other side.

Without waiting for me or Clara to respond, she walked imperiously into the room.

"Are you progressing?"

The question was directed at... Clara?

Huh?

Not at me?

I had been sure she was asking about how I was getting along with Operation Make Everyone Fall in Love with the King (provisional name). Did this imply that it was Clara, and not me, that she was going to trust for information on how things were going?

Clara's tail was standing straight up again. I was pretty convinced by now that this girl was happy to see Amatena.

"Well? Is there progress or no?" Amatena asked again.

Clara answered, "Yes," but only after a hesitant beat.

Wait a second...

Maybe the progress she, or perhaps her superiors, were interested in was progress in "pleasing" me. She was asking whether I had been served,

whether I had been happy with it, and whether Clara had managed to insinuate herself into my “exalted affections.”

Had she hesitated to answer because we hadn’t actually, you know... done anything yet?

I would definitely feel bad if that fact ended up getting her in trouble... but not bad enough to say “Welp, there you have it, no choice,” and jump into bed with her.

“Hm. I see.” Amatena nodded, apparently satisfied with Clara’s answer.

As for me, I stood up and spoke. “Amatena.”

“What is it?”

“Could I trouble you to show me the outside?”

“As I recall, you saw it yester—”

“I mean I want to see how the people of this country actually live,” I broke in.

I kept wondering whether the impression I’d gotten from the scene of the “father-king” waving at the crowd, along with the vibes from Amatena and Clara, was accurate or not. Who knew? Maybe the bland townscape I’d seen was actually all warehouses or something, and the places where people lived looked different.

Granted, I knew it probably wouldn’t be possible to learn absolutely everything and then make a completely objective judgment—but at the very least, I wanted to avoid drawing a snap conclusion from just one angle. That was dangerous and ugly. Not to mention, otaku knew something about being the victims of such narrow-minded verdicts.

“I’m not entirely sure that’s necessary.”

“How can you expect me to make up myths and legends about your father-king that the people will accept if I don’t know anything about the people?”

Amatena appeared to think this over for a moment before she nodded and said, “Very well. They say that success in battle hinges upon knowing one’s enemy. Perhaps knowledge of the other is equally important in all areas of life.”

I found myself blinking in surprise. *Hang on. Could it be that Amatena is... actually pretty smart?*

It hardly took her more than a few seconds to take what I had said and cast it in a form that made sense within her worldview. You would have to

think pretty hard to come up with battle as an analogy for brainwashing people. Or at least, she would have to be someone who didn't stop at the surface meaning of words.

"Get your outdoor clothes on. I will be waiting outside," Amatena said, and then she left the room.

When we told Her Majesty that we had something to report about Shinichi-sama, she admitted us to her presence immediately.

We were shown into the audience chamber, but not the one we had been in several days before. This room was several times the size of the other one, and we weren't the only ones there: there were at least twenty other people, ministers and influential nobles of all types. Her Majesty must have been in the middle of a meeting with her advisors, and she had interrupted it just for us. That made it obvious how worried she had been about Shinichi-sama.

"Excuse us," Minori-sama and I said as we approached the throne were Her Majesty sat.

Minister Cordobal and Prime Minister Zahar were in attendance beside the throne, while the rest of the audience chamber was packed with people of high station. Normally it would be unthinkable that I should so much as be near these people, let alone interrupt their conversation.

Understandably, most of those in the room had fixed us with glares that said, *What are these impudent low-borns doing here?* I could practically feel their eyes burning my skin.

Her Majesty spoke from the throne. "Minori. Myusel. You say you have something to tell us about Shinichi?"

"Yes, Majesty," Minori-sama said with a reverent bow. "We effectively have proof that Kanou Shinichi was abducted by the Kingdom of Bahairam. However, I'm given to understand that the Holy Eldant Empire cannot act to rescue him."

"It pains this nation deeply, but that is correct."

This answer came—not from Her Majesty, but from Minister Cordobal. Perhaps he wanted to make sure he spoke before Her Majesty had a chance

to.

“Would it be at all possible to entrust the matter to myself and Myusel?”

“Come again?”

“What I mean is...” Minori-sama turned and spoke, not to the shocked empress and her minister, but to Prime Minister Zahar. “Myusel and I wish to go to the Kingdom of Bahairam and bring back Kanou Shinichi. As individuals acting on our own, of course. I’m a member of the military, but not a citizen of the Holy Eldant Empire, and Myusel is currently nothing more than a household servant. On the chance that there was any kind of problem, the Eldant Empire could easily claim ignorance, and I don’t believe it would lead to any trouble for the empire.”

That set off a buzz in the audience chamber.

“Hmm.” Minister Cordobal, his brow furrowed, cut through the chatter. “Logical enough. But, Koganuma Minori, what good do you think the two of you can do by yourselves? You have a hunch he was captured by Bahairam, but no actual proof. You don’t, of course, know where in Bahairam he might be. We’re talking about a country with enough military might to oppose the Holy Eldant Empire—it’s not a small place. How do you intend to find him?”

“We’ll have Elvia guide us,” Minori-sama said.

“Elvia? Ah, the werewolf spy that Shinichi said he would keep close in order to keep an eye on her. I believe she was in the imperial soccer exhibition, was she not?”

“Yes, sir. Considering that, as you say, she was originally a spy who infiltrated the Eldant Empire, I have to imagine she can offer us at least some useful information.”

“That is true; however...” The minster made a thoughtful noise and then went quiet. Maybe he hadn’t expected what Minori-sama said—maybe no one had, because Her Majesty and Prime Minister Zahar were looking at us with troubled expressions, and the other ministers and nobles were all turning to each other and whispering.

As for me, I simply kept my head bowed and waited for Her Majesty’s judgment.

But I wasn’t to get off that easy.

“Myusel,” Her Majesty said.

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

“What are your thoughts on this matter?”

“M-*My* thoughts, Your Majesty...?”

The question threw me into a panic. Our plan had been for Minori-sama to do all the talking. It had never even occurred to me that I might be asked to speak in front of such an august company.

I couldn’t hold back a panicked cry as I glanced up—and found myself looking straight into Her Majesty’s eyes.

“Um... Er...”

I shot a helpless look at Minori-sama, but she didn’t say anything, only nodded broadly at me. I thought she was saying, *You’ll be fine. Just speak from the heart*.

“I just... simply... want to help Shinichi-sama. That’s all. That’s... I’m sorry. I’m too much of a fool to consider anything more complicated than that... I only...”

“Hmm.” And Her Majesty nodded.

“But, Myusel Fourant,” Minister Cordobal said, “you have been in our military, have you not? If you should infiltrate Bahairam, and happen to be captured, do you understand that you are likely to be seen as an Eldant spy?”

That set me back on my heels. Unconsciously, I touched the magic ring on my finger.

Yes, I had spent some time in the armed forces. As a half-elf, effectively an orphan with no one to support me, military service was the only possible way to gain Eldant citizenship... to gain anything resembling a decent life.

But...

“That magic ring has your personal information and service record engraved in it. Given that fact, your current ring shall be forfeit. Can you accept that?”

Did that mean I was going to lose my status as a citizen?

I hesitated... but only for a moment.

“I understand.”

I was ashamed of myself for my reluctance. I was weighing my citizenship against Shinichi-sama’s life, but how could the two even be compared?

Then Minori-sama spoke up from beside me. “But Minister Cordobal, being unable to communicate telepathically with Myusel will impair my

ability to work with her. I humbly request the temporary provision of a new magic ring."

"Naturally, that was my intention. Lack of a magic ring would make things harder after you entered Bahairam, as well. The accent there is impossibly thick."

.....What?

What was Minister Cordobal saying?

"We see that you are far too determined for us to stop you," Her Majesty said, "short of putting you in chains. Myusel, your devotion is more than evident to us. We must grant you a parting gift as well."

"What...? Um..."

The whole reason we had come to the audience chamber in the first place was to let them know that we intended no trouble for the Holy Eldant Empire by our actions, and if possible to request provisions, tools, and perhaps some way across the border with Bahairam.

But what could this "parting gift" be?

"Your Majesty?" the Prime Minister asked dubiously. The other worthies were also chattering amongst themselves. Minister Cordobal, however, let out a small sigh, as if he had a hunch what Her Majesty intended to give us. He rubbed his beautiful eyes with one hand.

"Fine, very well." The minister turned back to us once more. "When do you mean to depart?"

"As soon as we can be ready. Maybe tomorrow."

"Indeed," Her Majesty nodded.

From the assembled advisors and nobles there came no objection. Her Majesty's clear approval, accompanied by the lack of rebuttal from either Minister Cordobal or Prime Minister Zahar, left the others in the room hard-pressed to express a dissenting opinion.

"Minori. Myusel." Her Majesty spoke our names again.

More than that, in fact: she rose from her throne.

"Bring him back to us. Please."

Her voice was powerful and clear—and yet, there was an undercurrent of desperation, even pain. Perhaps Her Majesty wanted as much as I did—maybe more—to go help Shinichi-sama herself. But she had her position as Empress to think of. Unlike me, she had real responsibilities. It was unimaginable that she might abandon those duties to follow her own heart.

That was why she sent her heart with me.

Minori-sama and I both gave one emphatic nod.

“We will!”

On and on went the identical houses at identical intervals.

The same shape. The same color. In Japan it was possible to see public housing developments where everything had been built to the same blueprint, but this was... it was on a different scale. From one end of the street to the other, everything was the same. And I had the impression it was this way on all the other streets, too.

What was more, the scenery passing by the window of the dino-drawn carriage seemed impossibly dry. Partly that was due to the lack of greenery anywhere in the city, but I got the sense that the actual humidity was very low.

I’d also experienced the severe temperature differences between day and night. So it wasn’t just the clothes—the climate, too, was a lot like Earth’s Middle East.

I stared out the window. I didn’t see any people in town.

Actually, that wasn’t quite true. Once in a great while I would spot someone, but the number of people I saw seemed so small compared to how big the town was.

It was quiet. Too quiet, as they say. It felt lifeless, with none of the spontaneous chaos that usually characterizes an inhabited area. I felt like I was looking at a ghost town.

“Are these houses... all empty?” I asked.

“Hm?” Amatena gave me a questioning look. “What do you mean by that?”

“It’s just... I don’t see anyone on the street.”

“That’s because it’s time for work,” she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Most people are out in the fields.”

“Fields, huh?”

“Some work in factories or have special assignments, but the majority of our nation’s people are engaged in agriculture.”

“So most of you are farmers?”

“Farmers, soldiers, family.”

I let a questioning silence hang. I didn’t follow.

Soldiers I could understand. Some countries have militia systems, where in times of emergency everyone was expected to pick up a weapon and be part of the army. Most of the time they were farmers, but they were also soldiers in reserve.

“Family,” though...

“You said you wished to see how our people live, didn’t you?” Amatena said. “Then wait a bit longer. I believe what you see will satisfy you.”

With that, she fell silent again.

At length, she announced, “All right. We’re here.”

The dino-drawn carriage came to a stop. Wherever we’d been going, apparently we’d arrived.

I looked around, poking my head out the window of the carriage. I saw a large building ahead of us. Not as big as the “temple” from whose balcony the father-ruler had been waving, but several times the size of any of the houses along the street. The high ceiling gave the impression of some sort of storehouse; in any event, a quick glance at the outside made it clear that this was no ordinary house. Despite its size, it seemed to be just a single story.

“Let’s go,” Amatena said, disembarking.

We entered the foyer, then proceeded into the building proper.

“Huh...”

As I’d expected, the inside was a vast, open space. It was supported by a series of pillars, but there were no walls dividing the interior area. I assumed this was the main living space in this building, possibly supplemented by some smaller attached rooms. It almost looked like the worship hall of a church.

The building’s bland exterior belied the colorful inside, which was adorned with what seemed to be traditionally made decorations. It was different from anything else I had seen to that point. Could it be that the other seemingly plain houses were like this inside, too?

“What’s going on?”

Gathered in the large space were several dozen men and women. Humans made up more than half the group, but there were a lot of beast

people, too. I didn't see anyone resembling an elf, a dwarf, or a lizardman, though.

Everyone was dressed in traditional outfits—the beast people, in particular, seemed to show a lot of skin.

Now I get it.

I had always thought Elvia seemed pretty exposed, but I could see now that it was just part of Bahairam's culture.

Desert people in our world often covered their entire bodies to avoid sunburn and help regulate temperature, but as Elvia's "phase" made abundantly clear, her fur could get very thick, and when she shed it again, the skin could be very sensitive. So it was actually better for her to trap less heat by wearing fewer clothes.

This was a culture that had naturally been forged by the daily life and work of its people.

"And that's kind of beautiful, isn't it?" I remarked.

Maybe the overwhelmingly bland townscape I had been seeing all this time made the feeling more intense than it should have been, but the people in front of me seemed, in my mind, to embody at once both the culture of Bahairam and the nature of its people.

"I see," Amatena said slowly. Just for a second, something dark passed through her expression.

Huh? Was that the wrong thing to say?

Amatena must have noticed me looking at her, because she shook her head. "Hrm? Ahem. It's nothing."

That was another way of saying she wasn't going to answer any questions about it. Instead, I decided to ask about our location.

Amatena and I stood up against one wall, watching. "What kind of gathering is this?" I was pretty sure it wasn't a cosplay convention...

"It's a wedding."

"Oh, of course, a—"

A wedding?

I guessed that explained all the people dressed in traditional costumes. However—maybe the ceremony had just started, but there was one crucial element of a wedding that I didn't seem to see.

"Where are the bride and groom?"

"They're right there."

“Right... where?”

Amatena pointed to the men and women in the center of the room. But the gesture seemed to encompass at least a dozen of each.

“Sorry... Who’s getting married, there?”

“All of them. You can count at least thirty couples.”

“Thirty?”

Thirty brides and grooms?

“So, wait. Is this one of those, you know... mass weddings?”

“Correct.” Amatena nodded calmly.

As for me, I didn’t know what to say. Intellectually, I knew every country had its own culture and customs, shaped by its own history and conditions, so it was hardly the place of a foreigner—let alone someone from another world—to be judgmental or critical. But marriage was one of the most important events in a person’s life. Did everyone really not mind being wed all at once?

“Er, is it really okay for us to just drop in on a wedding ceremony like this?” Especially with an absolute stranger like me.

“It’s fine,” Amatena said curtly. “It’s only natural that family be present at a wedding. And although your disgusting self is not family, you’re with me, so you may join us.”

“Hold on... Family?”

Did Amatena have some blood relation in that group? I did spot a few werewolf men and women in there...

But then again, we had come here because I’d asked Amatena to show me something of the city and its people. Didn’t that mean that she wouldn’t have gone to this wedding if I hadn’t asked to go out?

And that suggested...

“No way...”

Father-ruler, the title they gave their king, danced through my head.

As if to lend credence to what I was thinking, three figures appeared on a balcony that ran along one wall of the open area. One of them I recognized.

“Is that...”

“Mm. The father-ruler,” Amatena said.

It was him: the same King of Bahairam I’d seen the day before. Two muscly guys, each wearing the same sort of uniform as Amatena, flanked

him; maybe they were bodyguards or something.

"But what is the king of the country doing a wedding ceremony?"

"Our father-ruler himself says the words of blessing at family weddings in our nation. One makes an eternal vow to the father-ruler, along with a vow of loyalty to him. That is the ceremony."

"You don't vow to... to God, or something?"

"Did I not say we vow to the father-ruler?"

I didn't speak for a moment. Was this... you know? One of those things where His Majesty the Emperor was also a living god?

"So the reason everyone's getting married at the same time..."

"They were waiting for the father-ruler to come to us," Amatena said.

So the king made these periodic tours of his kingdom, and whenever he showed up, they would have mass weddings or whatever. I had somehow always pictured a king as someone who stayed shut up in his castle, but it sounded like the King of Bahairam really got around.

Think about it. Based on their dress and culture, I might guess that Bahairam was made up of people who were originally nomads. That meant it was likely that this sort of settled lifestyle was a relatively new thing for them.

As I was ruminating about all this, one of the people standing beside the king opened a piece of sheepskin paper and called out a word I couldn't decipher. I gathered it was somebody's name. Given that this was a wedding ceremony, that implied it was one of the new brides and/or grooms. But... wait a second. So did that mean the guy wasn't a bodyguard, but more of a priest?

Whatever the case, from the crowd of couples emerged a man and woman; they came forward and knelt.

"In the name of our most honored father, I administer to you the eternal vow," the man beside the king said. "Be ever loyal as members of our family."

"It is our profound honor," the man and woman replied. They both looked deadly serious—and, if I may say so, not very happy.

And then...

"Next!" the man beside the king called out. The first bride and groom quickly moved to the side, and another couple walked forward. They were given the same brief, and oddly condescending, address, and they too

answered, “It is our profound honor,” before moving aside.

By the third couple, I was starting to get a little tired of it. What was this, an assembly line?

I mean, granted, if His Majesty the King really attended every wedding ceremony in the country, then he didn’t exactly have the luxury of time. It was more like... yes, he was dealing with strangers, but was this really enough?

Then Amatena added another twist of the knife. “In our country, when a man or woman reaches the appropriate age, he or she marries a partner chosen for him or her.”

“Huh? Chosen? Like, an arranged marriage? Who does the choosing?”

“The father-ruler,” she replied quietly.

Okay, wait. Hang on.

The *king* chooses everyone’s marriage partners? Even by this country’s standards, that sounded insane.

It seemed like it would have to be hard enough attending every single wedding ceremony in the country. For him to also personally pick everyone’s partners had to be impossible. Presumably, in practice, it was someone close to him, or maybe an official in each region, who made the selections.

But even that would mean...

“So you don’t get to marry the person you love—just the person the king chooses for you?”

“That’s correct.”

“That’s nuts is what that is.”

“It is natural for one to obey one’s honored father,” Amatena said bluntly.

“...Right...”

I didn’t know what else to say. All I knew was that it made me feel sick. It wasn’t right. People’s free will was being totally ignored.

But then... I couldn’t deny that this, too, could be considered a cultural difference. Manga and anime and games and light novels were overflowing with stories based on strategic marriages—matches made by the parents of the partners. As I recalled, during Japan’s era of civil wars, something like ninety percent of the marriages warriors made were political, with the partner acting almost as a hostage. Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s love marriage to

Nene was the exception, or so I'd heard.

Of course, in most of these works, the main characters object to the arranged marriage, and it becomes a whole drama. But the fact that it can be used for that kind of conflict is another way of suggesting how common it was in the past. So maybe it was me and my objections that were really crazy.

I figured the best thing to do at this point was to change the subject.

"Um... You mentioned family. Who here are you related to?"

"Everyone."

"Come again?" I said dumbly. "*Everyone*?"

I looked around the room once more. There were dozens of men and women there, and many of them weren't werewolves. I was sure not every single person present was there to get married, but it was still just too many people for every last one of them to be part of Amatena's family.

So I guess that must mean...

Given the way they referred to their king as the "father-ruler," it implied that all subjects of the kingdom were children of their god and father, His Majesty.

Amatena probably didn't realize she was confirming my suspicions when she said, "All of us are equally children of the father-ruler, so everyone is family to everyone else. That is the tie that binds us together and which makes the august nation of Bahairam possible."

I didn't respond right away. It looked like while we were talking, the vows to the father-ruler had finished.

Wait, that was fast!

True, at thirty seconds a couple, thirty couples would only take about fifteen minutes. Finally, the King of Bahairam said, "May all my children joined together here today have long lives and many progeny," and then he withdrew into the building. Hold on a second... *That* was the king's entire blessing?!

As I stood there practically fuming, the brides, grooms, and everyone else involved in the ceremony took the king's cue and started filtering out of the room.

"Is there a reception after this?"

"*Ree-sep-shun*?" Amatena asked. "What is that?"

"Huh? I mean..."

It had happened again. When you used a word the other person had no concept for, the magic interpreter ring wouldn't be able to translate it. In and of itself, this wasn't that unusual. But this time...

"It's, you know... The party they have after a wedding ceremony. Fancy-ish food, maybe some drinks..."

"Our country no longer has such dissolute functions," Amatena said sharply.

"Hold on. Dissolute?"

You'd think that if there was ever a time for a party, after a wedding ceremony would be it. The whole point of a wedding was for a couple's friends and family to celebrate as they set off on a new stage of their lives together. The reception was the couple's way of showing their appreciation for everyone's good wishes.

And she thought that was dissolute?

Could it be that in Bahairam, parties like that were considered an unacceptable luxury?

While I stood there in shock, everyone else in the room left. It was just me and Amatena now.

"The word *bahairam*," Amatena said as if it had just occurred to her, "means *family* in the old tongue. We are all of us children of the exalted father-ruler, and in him we are all equal. We do not have a discriminatory system of divisions like Eldant does with its nobility. Nor do we have any decadent customs. We are all one great family, living together here in this paradise."

"Paradise," I repeated.

The word sounded impossibly cold there in that empty room.

Dragon Knights delivered us and our cargo to the border.

To get into Bahairam, we would have to cross the mountainous region in the west. It was a difficult and dangerous area; while a beast person may not have worried about it, humans, elves, and dwarves were likely to find the going quite hard.

Thus Her Majesty the Empress, seeking to ease our burden however she

could, instructed the knights to take us and our belongings as far as was feasible.

The quickest and easiest thing of all would have been to ride those wyverns straight over the border, but if Eldant Dragon Knights were spotted in Bahairam, it would only intensify the border disputes again, so they stopped before crossing into the other nation.

"Right, then."

We were in a relatively open space in the forest that stood at the foot of the mountains on the border, doing a final inspection of our equipment. Bird-drawn carriages were obviously out of the question here, so we planned to bring only what we could carry. I say *planned*, because for some reason there were five large wooden chests with us.

They were from Her Majesty, who had wished to help us with equipment in any way she could. Still, we could hardly take all of this. And so I opened the chests and began the task of figuring out what we would bring and what would stay behind.

"Look at this!" I exclaimed when I opened one of the boxes.

A piece of paper, labeled "To Myusel" in Ja-panese, sat inside.

Truth be told, I can't read or write the Eldant language. The Ja-panese writing I learned from Shinichi-sama is the only thing I'm literate in. So somebody wishing to write me a letter would have to use that language...

The only person capable of writing to me in Ja-panese, and putting the letter in this box, no less, was Her Majesty.

I picked up the paper and turned it over. On the back was secured a small magical item, a thin piece of steel with a magic spell inscribed on it. I recognized it. It was a magic tag used to seal up a word-spirit; in the military, such things were routinely carried by messengers.

I touched the item and intoned, "I'm Myusel," and just as I expected, the word-spirit inside—the voice of Her Majesty—was released.

"Myusel. In consideration of our office, we are unable to accompany you on your journey. We send this with you instead. It is a battle dress we used ourself once, but it has been tailored to fit your body. The magical spells embroidered on the lining will surely aid you. If anything, we expect they will work better for one whose veins flow with the blood of elves."

With much reverent trembling, I peered into the wooden chest. To my astonishment, inside sat folded an outfit clearly fit for nobility or royalty—a

battle dress of silk with lavish gold and silver stitching. Supposedly, according to the message, one once used by Her Majesty herself.

What a tremendous honor...

“What’s up, Myusel?” Minori-sama asked, looking over my shoulder into the box.

“It’s... Her Majesty, she...”

“Oh. Ohhh. I get it,” Minori-sama said, not seeming especially surprised. “So this is why she wanted to know your syze.”

“I’m sorry...?”

“You remember how I measured everyone’s bodies when we made that movie?”

“Yes...”

I remembered Minori-sama measuring me, Elvia-san, and even Her Highness during the production of the movie. She had said it was necessary to create the costumes.

“Well, a while later, Her Highness ordered me to give her your measurements.”

“Uh... huh.”

“We had actually already talked about making you something like this. I may be Shinichi-kun’s bodyguard, but I was sure an outfit like this would be useful for you. There’s a lot of things I can’t do by myself, you know.”

It was true, I was with Shinichi-sama almost as often as Minori-sama was.

“I know you can use magic. And you can handle a sword, too, can’t you?” Minori-sama pulled a cape and a sword out of the chest.

“I only received the most basic training...”

I had learned a little bit about swordsmanship in the army. The most I could say was that I knew more about how to hold and strike with a sword than someone who had never picked one up in her life.

“Well, how about you borrow this one, then? You’ve got this cape. Wear it over your clothes and close the front, and no one will be able to see your equipment.”

“Right. That sounds like a good idea.” I nodded.

The honor of what the empress had done was almost overwhelming, but if I let it keep me from making good use of Her Majesty’s gift, that would be the most shameful thing of all. I decided, gratefully, to use the battle

dress.

Elvia-san was in her usual outfit, while Minori-sama was wearing a basically normal shirt and pants. Then there was me and my cloak. No one would mistake us for people from Bahairam, but we might look enough like traveling merchants not to stand out too much.

Minori-sama looked up at the towering mountains and sighed. “There was a mountain phase to my training, but it doesn’t change the fact that it’s frustrating to have to go this way when every minute counts.”

“You’re right,” I said.

There were several valleys that cut through the mountains, but they were all closely watched by both the Holy Eldant Empire and the army of Bahairam alike, and there was no way we could hope to get through them.

“It sure would be nice to just fly right over in a chopper. If only...”

“Chop-per?” I didn’t recognize the word.

“It’s a vehicle we have back in Japan. It flies through the sky.”

“You mean like a wyvern?”

“No, not really. It’s made of metal, see? And it’s got a big spinning wing...”

“A metal object that can fly through the sky?” I could hardly picture it. It seemed that the technology of Ja-pan had given birth to things that beggared the imagination. Like the “auto-mo-bile” that Minori-sama and the others sometimes rode in: it managed to move forward even though there were no animals pulling it. They claimed it didn’t operate on magic, but still...

“Then again, I guess a helicopter would be even more conspicuous than some wyverns.” Minori-sama gave a half-smile.

True, being able to fly would save us an awful lot of time. I dearly wished that we could fly, as it would get us to Shinichi-sama that much sooner.

“Even I needed a couple of days to cross these mountains,” Elvia-san said. “There’s lots of dangerous monsters, too, so we’ve got to be careful.”

That was one of the things I was concerned about. Rumor had it that wyverns were among the wildlife in this area, and unlike the mounts ridden by the Dragon Knights, wild wyverns were violent and dangerous. There were also stories of wild dogs and ghosts around here. Crossing these mountains would cost us more than just time. It could cost us our lives.

“Well, standing around here worrying won’t do us any good,” Minori-sama said, and went back to sorting through the luggage.

For my part, I took out the battle dress Her Majesty had given me and tried it on.

At that moment, Elvia-san said, “Huh? Is that...”

“What’s going on?” Minori-sama said, following Elvia-san’s gaze.

I did the same—and then froze stiff.

“That’s...”

A dark shadow circled lazily in the clear sky. Because it was backlit by the sun, we couldn’t make out many details, but the silhouette alone was enough to tell us what we were looking at.

“A dragon...!”

It was, without question, a True Drake, the creature people generally meant when they referred to a dragon. True Drakes were an order of magnitude bigger than wyverns, and probably more dangerous than any creature alive. On top of that, magic hardly affected them. Brutally violent by nature, encountering one was as good as a death sentence.

And here one was, right here.

Could this be coincidence?

“Or is it one of Bahairam’s...?”

One of their puppet drakes, perhaps. Had they found out about us and come to stop us?

I glanced over at Elvia-san, but she shook her head emphatically.

“I— I don’t know anything about this! I was totally in the dark about any puppet drakes!”

“Forget it, just hide!” Minori-sama ordered, and I quickly sheltered behind the wooden chest.

Ideally, we would have run somewhere we could hide better, but unfortunately, the dragon was immediately above us. Any thoughtless movement could have drawn its attention.

The monster passed directly overhead, then made a large circle and came back. Almost like it was looking for something in this area. Had it spotted us? We kept fearful eyes on the dragon, trying to keep our bodies loose enough to be able to make a run for it at any time.

Suddenly Minori-sama shouted, “He found us?!” and jumped for one of the boxes. It seemed there was some kind of Jay Ess Dee Eff weaponry

inside—although it probably wouldn't do us much good now. I began quietly chanting *Tifu Murottsu*, just to be ready. It might not have any effect against a dragon, but it might just buy us some time. That was all we could hope for from magic in this situation: a little time.

We had come here to save Shinichi-sama. Were we going to be killed by a dragon before we even made it into Bahairam?

That was definitely what Elvia-san and I were thinking, both of us stiff with fear.

But then we heard it: "Miiinoooriii-senseeeiii!"

The dragon seemed to be calling Minori-sama's name.

Wait... What?

Elvia-san and I looked at each other, stunned. We both knew dragons couldn't speak any human language. And that meant...

"Hang on... That voice!" Minori-sama said excitedly, looking up at the dragon.

I joined her in staring into the sky. "Oh...!"

The dragon made an abrupt descent. A face popped out from behind it. No, two faces. Two faces I recognized, in fact. Just as Minori-sama no doubt did.

"Loek? Romilda?!" Minori-sama's voice was just on the edge of cracking. From surprise, surely.

Yes: riding on the dragon were the elf boy Loek-sama and the dwarf girl Romilda-sama, both students at our school. Although both were demi-humans, they came from families that had been recognized for their contributions to the empire, and as such were treated more or less as nobility.

"We invited ourselves along!" Loek-sama said, waving and smiling broadly. Waving so hard, in fact, that he looked like he might fall clean off the dragon. Romilda-sama grabbed him by the collar to stop him.

"And just what do you mean by that?" Minori-sama asked, shocked.

She certainly wasn't more shocked than me and Elvia-san. We could only look on in astonishment as the two children and their dragon got closer and closer.

On closer inspection, we discovered that whatever it was, it wasn't a dragon. Yes, it looked like one, especially at a bit of a distance. But most dragons didn't make the sound of scraping metal when they landed on the ground.

Was it possible that this was...

"Minori-sensei!"

While I stood staring, Loek-sama jumped down from the dragon(-like thing)'s back and ran over to Minori-sama.

"Ahh, Minori-sensei! How I longed to see you!" He had both arms open as if he was expecting a hug.

Minori-sama, however, was looking at the dragon, still astonished. Loek-sama continued to run forward, embracing Minori-sama—

—almost.

"You dumb, stupid idiot!"

Ker-smash!

A long-handled axe slammed into Loek-sama's head with a sound that was practically visible, throwing the elf to the ground.

Holding the axe was Romilda-sama, who had been a second behind him dismounting the dragon. Dwarves like Romilda-sama may not have looked like much, but she was easily swinging an axe that I probably couldn't even pick up.

"You pervert! Stalker! Sexual harasser! We haven't been talking to her for five minutes, and look what you're doing!"

"Wh-Why you stinking, hole-dwelling—!" Loek-sama, rubbing the back of his head, reacted to Romilda-sama's yelling with some shouts of his own. "I don't have to take orders from you! And you just hit me out of nowhere! I knew dwarves were violent, but you're a menace! The purity of my love shall not be stymied by anyo—hgghr?!"

As Loek-sama declaimed, Romilda-sama trundled over on her stout legs and planted a foot firmly on his back, cutting him off.

"Quiet, you perpetually horny tree-hugger!" There was a muffled squeaking as she ground her boot into Loek-sama's back.

One might not expect Romilda-sama to be very heavy given her short stature, but then, she was still holding that giant battle axe. The combined weight had to be rather unpleasant. We could hear the occasional "hrgh" and "hagh" and "grrk" and other odd noises emanating from Loek-sama.

“H-How did you two come to be here?” I finally asked. “And what is this dragon...?”

The monster stood still and silent behind them. It was nearly the size of a house, but it showed no sign of going berserk—or for that matter, even of being alive. But then, if this was what I was beginning to suspect it was, that was only natural.

“Could this be... from our fyl-ming?”

“You got it,” Romilda-sama said, even as she continued to work her boot into the unfortunate Loek-sama. He was flailing his limbs, but didn’t seem to be making any progress at escaping from her. “It’s a fake.”

A very convincing fake, definitely, but if you looked very closely you could see that the “skin” was made of cloth held in place with metal fastenings, all covering something resembling metal armor.

“B-But we saw it flyin’,” Elvia-san protested, approaching the dragon warily.

She was right. Shinichi-sama had asked Romilda-sama’s parents to build a dragon puppet for us when we made our movie, but it was nothing more than that: when we wanted it to “fly,” we had to attach strings to it and have wyverns pull it up in the air.

This thing, though, seemed to be flying on its own. We certainly didn’t see any wyverns around.

“We use wind magic to make it move,” Loek-sama said nonchalantly from his place beneath Romilda-sama’s heel.

“Yeah,” Romilda-sama added. “Plus we move the wings and tail to help it ride the wind better. Magic, too.”

According to the two students, they used wind magic to move through the air, while magic that resonated with the metal was used to make the body move.

“We borrowed a few ideas from some of the anime we’ve seen,” Loek-sama said. “*Zo*ds* and Dan**uga and stuff.”

“Uh... huh.”

Neither of those sounded like very useful resources to me. The fact that these two had actually turned them to account was perhaps just more proof that they really were heirs to great families of the elves and the dwarves, respectively. Whatever the race, if a line of demi-humans had been acknowledged by the Holy Eldant Empire as especially distinguished—

probably in part for the powerful use of magic to better the Empire—then their traits most likely included formidable magical abilities. They must be able to do things that would seem impossible to an ordinary person.

"But," Minori-sama said, finally speaking, "why are you *here*? How did you know we would be here?"

"That's because I so desperately wanted to be of help to you, Minori-sensei!"

"Yipes!"

Loek-sama summoned a burst of strength enough to finally escape from Romilda-sama; he flew over to Minori-sama and took her hand in both of his.

"That's all well and good, but I mean, how did you know—"

"Ah, you and Myusel-sensei went and spoke to Her Majesty before you left, didn't you? My father was present at that audience."

"Oh..."

I thought back to the audience chamber packed full of important people. So Loek-sama's father had been among them. He must have gone home and spoken to Loek-sama, who rushed after us in his desperation to help Minori-sama.

That, however, would have been after we had already left with the Dragon Knights. So it seemed that after some deliberation, Loek-sama went to talk to Romilda-sama. Why had he gone to her instead of to his friends among the elves? For one thing, he claimed they had had plans for some time now to convert the now-unused prop dragon into something that could actually fly. But most importantly, his father was extremely influential among the elves. An unguarded word to one of his friends could easily reach the ears of his friends' families, and then his father would soon find out about his plan.

And so we found ourselves here...

"Minori-sensei!" Loek-sama practically shouted. "Take me with you!"

"I think you mean 'Take *us* with you,'" Romilda-sama said with a frown. "Because I know you can't manage the simplest thing by yourself."

Minori-sama looked at them both—and then shook her head. "No. This isn't a game."

She was right. We were risking our lives on this mission. Considering Minori-sama's position, it would be unforgivable for her to let Loek-sama

or Romilda-sama get involved.

Still, Loek-sama went on. “I know that! I’m serious!”

“Serious or not, this is dangerous!” Minori-sama said.

“I swear we won’t slow you down,” Loek-sama said, showing no sign of being deterred.

“That’s not the real issue here,” Minori-sama said with a deep sigh.

I was sure Loek-sama was telling the truth when he said he was serious. Even with Minori-sama sounding her sternest, Loek-sama didn’t seem the least intimidated, but just kept insisting he would come along. Somehow, it made him look almost... heroic.

“He’s really that devoted to Minori-sama...” I whispered, without meaning to.

To my surprise, it was Romilda-sama who answered. “That’s not all it is,” she said. “This isn’t all about Minori-sensei.”

“Then...”

“You aren’t the only ones... who are worried about Shinichi-sensei.”

I caught my breath.

Ahh! To think, there were other people who were this genuinely worried about Shinichi-sama. The thought made happiness well up in my heart.

“Anyway! I am absolutely not going back! Leave me behind if you want —I’ll just follow you!”

“Oh, for crying out loud...” Minori-sama was starting to sound thoroughly irritated—and tired out—by Loek-sama’s stubbornness. She put her hands to her head as if she might tear her hair out. She looked as if she just didn’t know what to do.

Again, given her position, how could she not hesitate to bring Loek-sama and Romilda-sama along? But there was every likelihood that if she turned them down, Loek-sama would simply trail us anyway. Actually, he had a dragon (or whatever it was). That meant he might even arrive at Bahairam before us, and then who knew what might happen?

“Um, Minori-sama?”

“What is it, Myusel?” Minori-sama’s voice was unusually sharp, and for once she didn’t bother to look at me as she spoke.

“I think it may be best to let them both come along.”

Minori-sama and Elvia-san both turned toward me with shocked expressions. Loek-sama and Romilda-sama, on the other hand, looked

thrilled.

“Not you too, Myusel. You do remember we’re marching straight into enemy territory here, don’t you?”

I didn’t respond immediately. I noticed Elvia-san, standing next to the dragon-like thing, twitch at Minori-sama’s words. I wasn’t sure if Minori-sama noticed, but she went on in a hard voice, “If they catch us, you know what they’ll do.”

“Yes, I know, but...” I thought for all I was worth. “But I have to confess that Loek-sama and Romilda-sama seem very set to me, and that nothing we can say will convince them to go home.”

“That’s—”

“In fact, I think that even if you leave them here, they’re likely to try to infiltrate Bahairam on their own. That being the case, I have to think it might be safer to have them with us...”

Minori-sama didn’t say anything.

“And it will save us a lot of time to fly across the border on this dragon marionette rather than to cross the mountains on foot. I know a little bit of wind magic myself. Between us, Loek-sama and I should be able to make it go a little quicker...”

My magical abilities weren’t as strong as those of a pure-blooded elf like Loek-sama, but I would be able to contribute.

“And in order to make the creature fly properly, we need Romilda-sama’s magic, too...”

“That’s absolutely right,” Romilda-sama said, taking up the thought. “We tried to have Loek-sama control it with just his wind magic a few times, but it never worked.”

Minori-sama was frowning deeply, her arms crossed. She let out a deep, long groan and then, finally, a defeated sigh.

“Myusel.”

“Yes?”

“I think Shinichi-kun’s rubbed off on you.”

“Er? O-On me?”

“For better or for worse,” she said with a half-smile. Then she turned back to Loek-sama and Romilda-sama. “Looks like I’m left with no choice. You swear not to slow us down, right?”

“Yes, ma’am!” For once in their lives, the eternally arguing pair

answered in unison.

“Once we get into Bahairam, you will follow my orders absolutely, without question. That’s my condition.”

“Yes, ma’am!” they answered, in unison once more.

Chapter Three: Elvia and Amatena

“Whoooooaaaaaaa!”

Elvia-san was on all fours, clinging to the neck of the Faldra—the name Loek-sama had given to this creation, short for “false dragon.” There was nothing to hold her in place. Elvia-san’s tail was wagging wildly; from excitement, I supposed. For my part, I was very anxious: it looked like she might tumble off at any moment.

The rest of us were sitting on the Faldra’s back, but we were using leather straps with metal fasteners to secure ourselves. Even so, we were up high enough that looking down at the ground made me distinctly uneasy.

That ground, though, was amazing to see. The mountains that had seemed so thoroughly intimidating on foot now spread out beneath us as if a child had built them out of sand—as if we could sweep them aside with a motion of an arm. They seemed so impossibly small.

During our ride with the Dragon Knights, we had been more or less boxed in by cargo, so there hadn’t been much opportunity to take in the scenery. But now, exposed to the gusting wind and rich sun, it truly felt like we were flying.

Maybe I couldn’t blame Elvia-san for playing around a bit.

We would soon enter Bahairam territory. Crossing the border had turned out to be almost comically simple.

The cloth “skin” of the Faldra would make it look, from below, almost like a real dragon from a certain distance. On that note, the wyverns the Dragon Knights rode carried saddles and armor that gave them a very distinctive silhouette; no one in Bahairam would have mistaken what they were looking at. As it happened, there were many types of dragons and lizards native to Bahairam, such that some of the more docile ones were even bred to pull their carriages, or so I had heard.

“We’ll be heading down soon!” Minori-sama shouted against the wind. “Land it in that forest.” She pointed to a small copse of trees standing smack in the middle of the landscape of sand and rocks below us.

“Roger that!” Loek-sama said, and then he and I began using our wind magic to decrease our speed and altitude bit by bit. Romilda-sama changed the angle of the wings, helping the Faldra to a nice, gentle landing. The branches of the trees rustled as we came down, some of them snapping off as the huge creature passed by them, but we managed to come down in a relatively open area. We were still going a bit too quick and kicked up a lot of grass and dirt as we slid along, but soon the Faldra came safely to rest.

“Phew...” Minori-sama let out a sigh of relief. She must have been more nervous than she’d let on. “Good work, everyone. I’m sorry to say this, but there’s no time to rest.”

“Right!” Loek-sama and Romilda-sama nodded.

“Obviously we can’t go riding this thing into town. Loek, Romilda, you cover the Faldra with leaves and branches so it stays hidden, then wait here with it. We’ll leave about half the luggage, too, so you’ll need to stand guard.”

“Huh? ’Fraid not,” Loek-sama said, shaking his head. “I’m going with you, Minori-sensei.”

“No, you’re not. We’re dealing with genuine covert activities from here on out. One wrong move and you could get stabbed in the back. I won’t be able to look after everyone at once. The fewer people we have with us, the better, and anyway, we need someone to look after the Faldra and the cargo.”

“B-But couldn’t you have Romilda do that?”

“Stop trying to delegate, branch brain,” Romilda-sama said, frowning angrily.

“No,” Minori-sama said. “You both promised to follow my orders, right? Stay here and keep watch—together. There’s always a limit to what one person can do alone.”

Loek-sama looked ever more distraught. Minori-sama spared him a dry smile and said, “And if we need you to rescue us, I’ll call you with this.” She gave him a long, rectangular object that looked like a cross between a box and a stick. If I recalled correctly, it was called a *communications dee-vyce*, a way for people who were far apart to talk to each other. Ja-pan’s equivalent of a magical item.

“What’s this?”

“I’ll show you how to use it later. If we happen to need to make an

emergency escape, we'll need you to come get us on the Faldra. Can I trust you to do that?"

"Y-You sure can. Leave it to me!" Loek-sama said, putting a hand to his chest.

Minori-sama nodded at Loek-sama and Romilda-sama, then turned to Elvia-san. "All right, Elvia, get the luggage. The leather pouch. The hemp pouch we can leave. Sorry, but can I ask you to handle half the cargo?"

"...Yeah, sure," Elvia-san said, with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. I assumed this was about more than having to carry bags. She had to be upset that when she finally came back to her home country, it was essentially as a traitor.

"Myusel and I will handle the rest of the luggage."

"Sure."

"Loek, Romilda, you get on hiding the Faldra. Elvia, Myusel, put the bags on your backs. And then let's blow this scene!"

"Right!" we all (except Elvia-san) answered eagerly.

I was in my room, sitting vacantly in my chair. Clara had been with me until just a little while ago, as she always was... but then, for some reason, she left. Maybe she had something to do. So now I was alone, and I promptly lost myself in thought.

It had been two days since I attended the wedding, and in that time I hadn't been able to figure out what I would do from here.

In this country they called the king their "father" and proclaimed that all the nation's citizens were equal as family. That wasn't necessarily a bad system as far as it went. The sense of unease I was experiencing might simply have been because I was an outsider. Amatena and the others didn't see anything especially unusual about the arrangement.

And yet...

"I can't help thinking I smell something fishy..."

They claimed all the people in the nation were equal, but by definition, the existence of a state system implies some measure of difference. The closer you are to the seat of power, the better life is likely to be for you. In our world, even communism, which is probably the most aggressive political philosophy as far as promoting the equality of all people, tends to end up like that.

The whole notion of complete equality is an ideal, not a reality. Brains.

Brawn. Sensitivity. Beauty.

These represent differences between people, who naturally have more of some and less of others. People aren't even born equal. In fact, they can hardly be more different. You have people who turn out to be geniuses in a specific field, and on the other hand, you have people like me, whose only talent is for weird otaku stuff.

So if you had a state that tried to eliminate such differences in ability by force... Well, it would essentially be repression towards people of exceptional talents, a kind of discrimination all its own.

"I guess if the system worked as advertised, they wouldn't be coming to me to beef up the father-ruler's charisma."

Amatena had told me to create some work that would strengthen the father-ruler's grip on the people and make the Bahairamanians even more loyal to him.

In other words, propaganda.

Obviously, though, Bahairam didn't have the equipment to make a movie, so we wouldn't be able to do the same thing I had done in the Holy Eldant Empire. They were effectively asking me to make up a story that would cause the people to respect the father-ruler unquestioningly.

Considering the state of magic around here, even if a movie wasn't feasible, it might have been possible to create a shadow play or something. In a world that seemed to have few entertainments, even that might be enough to get a pretty big reaction out of the populace. Think about the *Arabian Nights* in our world: long before movies or even the printing press, stories had the power to move ruler and subject alike. And there are lots of similar examples.

But if the father-ruler already had a pretty good hold on this country, there was probably no need for those sorts of tales. In order to "reeducate," or at least further educate, the people, we would need a myth that imputed even more authority to the father-ruler. Or looking at it the other way around, if we failed to tell such a story, resentment against the father-ruler might boil up among the people.

"Hmmm..."

No matter how I looked at it, all I could see was a bald grab for despotic power.

They said the majority of the country's population were farmers. That

made me think of that poster child of evil, Pol Pot. Not that I'm implying there's a direct comparison between Cambodia under Pol Pot, with all the attendant international circumstances, and the nation of Bahairam. Nor did I think Bahairam was in the process of killing off an entire intelligence operation that had turned against the government.

But anyway, that's beside my point.

In the end, I resisted the idea that I—or rather, my knowledge and experiences as an otaku—should be used as a tool to control people. Maybe that sounds questionable, coming from someone who had already allowed himself to be an accomplice to cultural invasion once, but I just didn't think culture should be a political tool. Obviously there was no way to completely separate culture and politics, and I knew that. But still...

"Kanou Shinichi."

As I sat in thought, there was a knock at the door—the door that led outside. Before I could answer, the door opened, and Amatena came marching in.

"Have you come to any conclusions yet?"

"Conclusions?"

"Clara reports that you appear to have been thinking about something. We decided to give you some time alone."

"Oh..."

So that was why Clara had disappeared.

That also meant she *was* keeping an eye on me, after all. Which wasn't all that surprising, really.

"Have you been able to formulate any ideas for the creation of myths about the father-ruler?"

".....Myths?"

It wouldn't do to laugh at that moment, despite the idea that a pack of lies some random otaku came up with might become a genuine legend. Then again, it was surprising how often myths started like this. Told and retold over the course of hundreds or thousands of years, it might dry up, gather dust, and actually become pretty mythic.

Think about how many myths were sexy, and/or involved harems or even supernatural powers. Heck, just set one at a school and you pretty much had a light nov—

You know what? Forget about it.

“Hey, Amatena,” I said.

“What is it?”

“There’s one thing I want to be sure about,” I said, measuring my words. “Exactly what kind of ‘myths’ do you have in mind?”

There was a question in her eyes; it didn’t seem like she had expected me to ask that. She frowned in thought for a moment before replying, “For example, we have a story about the first king of our nation. Our people had no way to resist when an enemy country invaded, but the first king invoked the words ‘Victory be to our people,’ whereupon a whirlwind sprang up and swept away the cruel enemy soldiers.”

“Ahh... I get it.”

So I was right: this was about asserting authority. Coherence wasn’t a big concern. The story didn’t offer a scientific explanation for why the king could do such a thing, and it didn’t matter. *“Lord Whoever could do that because he was great and just. Long live Lord Whoever!”* That was all the explanation a story like that needed.

But...

“Uh, I just had a thought.”

“What?”

“This country seems to have a lot of... differences. Odd inconsistencies, if you know what I mean. Like the clothes you’re wearing versus everyone else. And the ceremony at that building. I feel like it all lacks a certain unity.”

Amatena only frowned.

“Could it be... and this is just a guess on my part, but... however many generations the current king represents... did things in Bahairam change drastically under him?”

The desolate look of the city.

The simple, plain clothing of the people.

The weirdly traditional-culture-esque buildings.

The wedding ceremony, with its seemingly deep roots in popular custom.

Everything I had seen so far somehow seemed to represent different extremes. Too different.

Did it suggest that the current king, coming after however many of his ancestors, had chosen to take his country in a very different direction?

Maybe even do a 180-degree shift in policy?

To take examples from our own world, after the Cultural Revolution, things in China were... well, I won't say completely different, but very, very different. And changes in the Japanese government after the country's defeat in World War II, brought about mostly at American insistence, were said to have had a significant effect on the culture.

Amatena was silent for a moment, thinking about something. Then she said bluntly, "So you know?"

"I can guess... More or less."

So Amatena proceeded to fill me in. This is what she said:

Bahairam was not an especially bountiful country, in the beginning. In fact, the land didn't yield much, so for the most part people migrated from area to area like birds, chasing scarce water and food. When one place dried up, they would move along to another until the first place naturally regained its abundance. This was the way the people had always lived. The king's travels from city to city were also, I gathered, a relic of this time.

Starting several kings back, though, there had been a major change in national policy. The long-standing solidarity of the people was what caused them to embrace this new policy, which aimed at a bountiful nation and a strong army. Bahairam attacked neighboring countries, absorbing their territory along with rich water resources, versatile land, and secure sources of food. The population increased.

This all meant that the people of Bahairam no longer had to wander from place to place; they could settle in just one spot, and many did. The abandonment of their nomadic lifestyle further increased the population, and they found themselves with the spare resources to improve the land and do other, similar tasks. Almost before anybody knew what was happening (including Bahairam), the country was almost as big and as strong as the Eldant Empire.

That king from several generations ago was, therefore, revered as a hero in Bahairam.

However, when lifestyle changes, so too does culture. Banding together to make the nation more powerful became the most prized principle in the land, while individual inequalities and grievances were suppressed as "threatening harmony." Old customs and rituals were quickly abandoned—or rather, cast aside because they were seen as getting in the way.

The result of all this was the Bahairam I saw now.

"You're really something, Amatena," I said when she was finished talking.

"Hm?" she said.

"It's like, you know how sometimes it's hardest to know your own self? A lot of times people who live somewhere aren't able to take an objective view of that place. But you seem like you can."

For one thing, it could be hard to personally get a handle on changes that had happened over such a long period of time. It can be hard to grasp the big picture when you're *in* the picture. There were probably a lot of Bahairamanians who didn't have the knowledge or the comprehension to explain why the country was the way it was.

But to me, Amatena's voice as she described the history of her nation sounded almost objective. Like a third party talking.

"On account of my work," Amatena said after a moment, "I often have occasion to travel outside my country." What I thought might be a wry smile played across her face for a second. "If anything, I frequently see this nation from a place rather unlike one of its subjects. It's not a good habit. All I can say is that perhaps I've been poisoned by the twisted thinking of other countries."

I didn't say anything. But I wondered, was that really true? In the end, who was it that was really twisted?

It had been about half a day since we'd emerged from the forest.

We worked our way across a wasteland of sand and rocks until we arrived at a road, then followed it toward the closest town. Once in a while, we might see inhabitants of Bahairam, or sometimes what looked to be traveling merchants coming or going from some other country, but for the most part the road seemed deserted. It was almost hard to believe that it was leading to a town or city.

"I'm almost certain the... the 'eastern city' or something is supposed to be this way." Minori-sama pulled an item out of her bag, something called a 'sumart fone' or something. Shinichi-sama had had one, too, although his

was a different color.

“According to the Eldant Empire’s information, it’s not the capital, but it’s a pretty big town. Maybe the size of Nagoya or Osaka, in Japanese terms. I’m not exactly sure how likely it is they took Shinichi there, but...”

If there was one word to describe Bahairam, it was *big*. We assumed they wouldn’t have taken Shinichi-sama to some little farming village, so it made sense to try for a bigger city where there might be a military or government installation. But there were several of those in Bahairam, and strangers like us wouldn’t know much about them.

“What do you think?”

“I... I don’t really know either...”

Despite my eagerness to go and rescue Shinichi-sama all by myself, I didn’t actually have any good way of finding him.

“I figured. I guess we’ve got no choice but to ask a local.” Minori-sama turned to Elvia-san. “Elvia. Where do you think Shinichi-kun is?”

Elvia-san, though, kept silent. She just stared vacantly into the distance, across the street.

She was, incidentally, carrying almost twice as much baggage as either me or Minori-sama, so she was quite a sight to see. It didn’t look so much like she was walking as like the cargo was stumbling along, and she happened to be stuck to it. But the arrangement didn’t seem to tire her out. She looked more... unenthusiastic.

Minori-sama and I shared a glance.

It seemed less like Elvia-san was ignoring us and more like she had something on her mind and wasn’t paying attention. She didn’t look like her usual, bright self; ever since we had arrived in the Kingdom of Bahairam, she had seemed under a cloud.

“Elvia?” Minori-sama got right up close to her.

That seemed to bring her back. She blinked and looked at Minori-sama. “.....Uh, oh, yeah? What is it?”

“We were just discussing where Shinichi-kun might be.”

“Wh-Why’re you asking me?”

“Well, you’re a spy from this country, aren’t you, Elvia?” Minori-sama said with a grin. “I have to figure that whoever you were working for, it was probably special ops from that group that kidnapped Shinichi-kun. I somehow doubt a place at this cultural level has a bunch of competing spy

organizations. I'm betting you've got a sense of where they would take a hostage. I just wondered if there might be a place like that in this 'eastern city' we're getting to."

After a very long pause, Elvia-san answered, "I... I don't really know." Then she looked away from Minori-sama and went quiet again. She didn't look very happy. Was I right? Was it because she didn't want to betray her home country by helping us? I had to say, I could sympathize with that feeling.

"Me," she whispered, "I'm not... I'm not like my big sisters Jiji and Ama. I'm not as... *good* as them."

Jiji? Ama? She called them her sisters. They must have been part of her family.

"I'm always just the gofer."

Maybe she was trying to explain that because she wasn't "good," she'd had to accept the lowest assignment: spy.

"So I really don't think you're gonna find I'm much help..." She looked sadly at Minori-sama, who let out a breath that suggested how much all of this disturbed her.

"Um, Elvia-san," I said. There was something I wanted to know, and know now. "Do you love Shinichi-sama?"

"Huh? Come again?!" She sounded shocked. Maybe she hadn't expected the question to come from me.

I ignored her and went on, "Or do you hate him?"

"Th-That's not—" She waved her hands frantically and shook her head. "I mean, I sure don't! How could I?! I owe my life to Shinichi-sama! And he lets me do my drawings, and has me draw all these interesting things, and—"

There she paused and looked at the ground for a moment.

"A-And... he said he was '*moe*' for me, y'see..." She was practically whispering. "My ears and my tail... He said they didn't bother him."

This word Shinichi-sama used, *moe*. It generally meant "cute" or "lovable"—and those were not things that human men usually said about demi-humans. Everyone—not just in the Holy Eldant Empire, but everyone everywhere—knew that humans were the most beautiful and the most desirable, and demi-humans would never be on their level.

That was why Shinichi-sama's words were so surprising. Not just to

Elvia-san, but to me.

“I feel the same,” I said, putting a hand to my chest. “I’m a half-elf and a maid, but Shinichi-sama never let there be a distance between us. He acted toward me just like he acted toward everyone. He even taught me how to read and write Ja-panese. He took my side when Her Majesty was angry at me. And he’s so kind to Brooke-san and Cerise-san as well...”

I was very happy, and very proud, to be with such a man. Since meeting Shinichi-sama, my way of life—indeed, my very life itself—had changed. If I had never met him, I would have gone along hating myself for what I was, cursing my mother and father for bringing me into the world. It would have been a sad way to live.

“It has to be Shinichi-sama. No one else,” I said, my hand clenching in front of my chest. “If I can’t be at Shinichi-sama’s side, that will be it for me.”

“Myusel...” Elvia-san was looking at me, taken aback.

“I’m going to help Shinichi-sama, no matter what it takes. No matter what I have to do. I know what we’re asking of you isn’t fair. I know it’s like betraying your country, and I don’t blame you for not wanting to do that. But for me, asking you to do this unfair, impossible thing... Right now, it’s my only choice.”

Elvia-san looked awfully distraught, but she didn’t say a word.

It was Minori-sama who spoke instead. “I want to help Shinichi-kun, too. Partly, it’s true that I do bear some of the responsibility for his disappearance. But even if I didn’t, I’d like to think I still would have come here to save him.”

“Minori-sama...”

“The first time we met, I wasn’t sure we were going to survive each other,” she said with a grin. “He was immediately all about my chest. It was... kinda harassment-y. But I’ve gotten fond of him, and I don’t just mean because it’s my job to look after him. I know how he can come across, but he’s actually got a strong heart. He’s an otaku, but a surprisingly together one.”

Minori-sama glanced up at the far-away sky for a second as she said, “Kindness alone doesn’t do that for a person. They have to do it for themselves.”

I was dumbfounded.

Shinichi-sama said that Minori-sama was an “otaku,” too. Unlike me, she had been born and raised in the same world as him, spoke the same language, and was also an otaku. So maybe she could see things about him that I couldn’t see.

To be perfectly honest, the thought made me a little envious. Jealous.

“I do feel bad for threatening you into coming along. Let me ask you again. Elvia, if you don’t hate Shinichi-kun, like you say, then help us to help him. If we end up having to fight other Bahairamanians, then Myusel and I will stand and you can run away. But please at least stick with us until we find Shinichi-kun.”

Elvia-san stared silently at the ground for a while. Her tail drooped weakly.

“You’re a cheater,” she said softly. “That’s not a fair way of asking...”

Her head hung for a few minutes. Then suddenly—

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh! Hell!”

She turned toward the sky and nearly howled.

“Fine! I’ve come too far to turn back, anyway. Might as well do everything I can where I am!” Her tail sprang up again. It was that tail, more than her words or even her face, that spoke to her true feelings. Maybe she had finally resolved herself.

“When I said I don’t know where they took Shinichi-sama, that was the truth. Garden-variety spies like me aren’t in the loop on what the brass is doing. But I think I know someone who might know what happened to him.”

“Oh?” Minori-sama said, leaning forward.

Elvia-san nodded. “It’s a bit of a walk, but just follow me!”

“Huh? W-Wait, where are we—?”

“Hey! Hold on, Elvia!”

Elvia-san set off so quickly it was as if she didn’t even notice the bags she was carrying. Minori-sama and I hurried to catch up.

You can pick your words as carefully as you like, control your expression as carefully as you’re able. But sometimes—sometimes, you still

can’t keep your true feelings from showing through.

It was just sort of an intuition, but I somehow got the sense that Amatena didn’t actually believe that things in Bahairam were fine the way they were. When she talked to me about the country’s past and present, I could sometimes detect a hint of hesitation.

But Amatena belonged to the Bahairamanian military. And not as a “farmer-militiaman,” but a proper professional soldier. She had an official position to consider, and that meant keeping her mouth shut even if things didn’t quite feel right to her, or if she had some sort of issue. All the more so if the country was in transition like this one was—any kind of mutterings then could be considered rebellion or treason.

And so...

“Anyway,” Amatena said, “I think that should give you a general understanding of our country. I want you to finish your job as quickly as possible, you piece of filth.”

I didn’t have much to say to that.

My job.

In other words, produce some kind of work that would increase solidarity among the people and make them ever more loyal to the king. Think of a myth that would praise the King of Bahairam to the high heavens. It didn’t have to be plausible. It didn’t even have to be coherent. It just had to do the job.

I sat in silence. I didn’t like this any better now than I had earlier.

Even setting aside my insistence on individualism, helping to create an obviously flawed story went against my dignity as an otaku. There was only one thing to do.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I couldn’t even meet Amatena’s eyes; I looked at the ground instead. “I don’t want to do it.”

Yes! I said it!

I was a little embarrassed by the tremor in my voice, but I had managed a clear and direct refusal. Yes, this was a real sign of how much Kanou Shinichi had grown. I’d become “The Kanou Shinichi Who Can Say NO”!

And Amatena? She simply nodded.

“I see.”

Huh?

“In that case, there’s nothing to be done.”

“What...?”

I was thrown off by how... ready she seemed to be for this.

I had been set for a fight, and now I felt foolish. Maybe Bahairam was a more generous place than it looked. Maybe if you just explained things logically, they were willing to accept them. But then... why would a country like that engage in kidnapping?

I was mulling over all this when Amatena said, “You have a choice to make.”

She was expressionless. Well, she was usually expressionless, but somehow it was scarier than usual.

“Help with the myth,” she said. “Or refuse, and kill Clara.”

“.....Huh?”

For a second, I was totally lost as to what she was saying. Clara? How did she fit into this?

“What are you—”

“If your disgusting self will not do as you’re told, we will have no choice but to find alternative means of persuasion.”

“No, wait, hold on. I mean, what’s Clara got to do with anything? Let alone killing her?”

Amatena’s expression (or lack of one) didn’t change. I had thought Clara was absent to give me some time to think. But maybe she was being held somewhere as a hostage.

But again: why her? I guess obviously I would feel guilty if someone were killed on my account. But the whole point of a hostage is to threaten someone your target feels close to.

Sure, living together for ten days had caused me to feel a certain affection for her. But Clara was Bahairamanian. I was closer to the Eldant Empire, so if anything, she was effectively my enemy.

So here was Amatena, threatening to kill Clara. But from my perspective, it was basically an enemy soldier with a knife to the neck of her own comrade. It just seemed sort of... pointless. Why was she telling me this?

“Look, I just don’t understand...”

“Are you telling me you can simply ignore the death of a woman to whom you’ve made love?”

“...Huh?”

"...Hm?"

The two of us shared a profoundly odd moment.

"Still not getting it."

"I'm asking, will you abandon someone with whom you've had relations?"

"Do all beast people use that word so casually?!" I exclaimed.

Wait! Not the time for a vocabulary lesson!

"R-Relations? Listen, we... We haven't, you know... *had* relations."

"What?" Amatena asked, shocked. Well, her expression (or lack of one) still didn't change, but that made the disturbed raising of her eyebrow all the more expressive. "You haven't? After ten days living with her, you haven't had relations? Not even once?"

"For the love of God, what is it with you guys and your relations?!"

Hearing that word so many times from so many girls was going to shatter all my dreams! She could at least find a nice euphemism. *To do it* or *to do that* or something. Or maybe she could blush a little as she said it—that was an important point! Very important, in my opinion! That's Kanou Shinichi's argument!

.....Okay, sorry, forget about it.

"Whatever word you use, no, we haven't done it!"

"No relations at all...?" Amatena said. There went the eyebrow again.

"Nope."

"Are you not... interested in women?"

"Wrong-o!"

"Don't tell me some illness prevents you from achieve an erec—"

"Working fine, thanks!"

I'm begging you! Stop! I don't want to hear words like that from someone with Elvia's face!

Even though her absolute coolness makes her, like, way totally different from Elvia, and..... huh?

Maybe this is actually okay?

As my mind started to wander off in the most perverse of directions, Amatena brought the eyebrow up one more time, this time in annoyance.

"Then why?"

Why? She wanted to know why?

Well, then I would tell her.

I would speak my truth.

"Yes! Lolita!" I cried, holding my right arm at an angle as if to say *Na** *science is the best in the wooooooooorllllld!* "NOOOOO TOUCH!"

Phew. I did it.

That was perfect. Flawless.

I looked at Amatena with a relieved smile, but she looked back at me with deep suspicion and no sign of being convinced.

Um...

"Did Clara not invite you?" Her tone was ice-cold.

So this was how it felt to put your heart and soul into something and have it fall flat. I was not liking it.

"U-Uh, well, yes..."

She had definitely "invited" me, but... well, you don't look a honey badger... I mean, a honey trap in the eye and say yes.

You know what I mean by honey trap, right? I read somewhere once that there are basically two tricks that have been used everywhere throughout human history to cause the betrayal of groups and countries: money and women.

So a spy organization sends a beautiful female agent to some man to pillow-talk him out of crucial information he has. Or maybe they send a handsome guy to the wife of someone in a high position, then kidnap her and get the information that way. This stuff really happens. Although I don't know if it's a good idea, given how often it ends up in gunfights... at least in Hollywood movies.

And that was what had happened here: Amatena thought she had set a trap for me in the form of Clara. She assumed that over the course of ten days together, we would naturally end up in a certain sort of relationship, and she was trying to threaten me on that basis. She probably should have checked with Clara on that. But then, maybe Clara really believed I had some disease that would kill me if I got intimate with a girl, and was under the impression that she had gotten "close" to me with all the other ways she had found to help me.

"Clara was a plant. You wanted her close to me so that I would do what you said."

"She's my subordinate. I knew I could trust her."

"I should have figured." I heaved a sigh.

I hadn't laid a finger on Clara, but I admit it had made me sort of happy the way she tried so hard to do things for me. Finding out definitively that that was just another part of the trap was a little disappointing. Of course, Clara's tail had already given away that she was a lot closer to Amatena than she was to me.

"But why Clara?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"It's just... You know. She's so... *young*."

Wouldn't you normally pick a luscious older woman to try to seduce someone? Of course, I did have a major soft spot for those sort of did-they-have-a-chest-or-didn't-they lolita types.

"Is that not the type you prefer?"

"Me? Uh, well, y'know..."

"I'd heard you were one of the concubines of the Eldant Empress."

"Excuse me?"

"The Eldant Empress, Petralka. Are you not her lover?"

"One of her—whaaaat?!"

We were pretty good friends, sure! But definitely, definitely not anything that sounded so, you know... So sordid! Even though yes, I did kind of dig her!

"I'm telling you, that's not the way it is between us."

"Oh no? I suppose some spies give better information than others."

I guess so, when you consider someone like Elvia a spy. Anyway, rumors and hearsay are bound to get mixed up in whatever an intelligence agent reports.

"So you're with some intelligence agency, right, Amatena? Trying to find out what's going on in enemy countries and all? Can I assume Clara is part of the same group?"

"You can," Amatena said, though she seemed to wonder why I was asking about this now.

"Well, look, I know it's her job, but sending kids like Clara to have r... relations? With people they don't even care about? I don't think that's a good thing."

"In the prosecution of one's duty there is neither good nor bad," Amatena said.

We were talking about a country where having your partner for life

picked out by the “father-ruler” was considered perfectly normal, so maybe I shouldn’t be surprised if they had different ideas about chastity, too. One thing was for sure, though: I didn’t think I was ever going to quite feel at home in Bahairam.

“Anyway.” I decided to push my advantage. “Clara’s useless as leverage. We haven’t done anything together, so I don’t have any special feelings for her. Threaten to kill her—I don’t care. You guys can do what you like. If you don’t think I’m telling the truth, just ask her.”

On one level, these words sounded impossibly cruel; my better nature made my heart ache as I spoke them. But at the same time, if I hesitated now, there was no question: I would be made head of the Father-Ruler Promotion Bureau, over my objections.

Just stay cool. I have to pretend my conscience isn’t my guide, here.

When they realized Clara served no purpose as a hostage, they would see there was no need to kill her, right?

That, at least, was what I was telling myself as Amatena remained eerily silent.

She was obviously thinking hard, her brow furrowing deeply. Finally she said, “I see,” and nodded.

Oh! So she sees!

Maybe I could even capitalize on this momentum to negotiate my release, or—

“You leave me no choice, then. This is the one thing I didn’t want to do, but...”

“Uh...?”

She was practically expressionless. I reflexively took a step back, but found a wall immediately behind me.

Elvia had already proved that I was powerless against a werewolf girl on a mission—although I assumed Amatena had something other than seduction in mind at this point.

“This is the one thing I didn’t want to do...”

What could she possibly describe like that?

“Um... Uh... Amatena...-san?”

But of course, she didn’t answer.

I could only watch helplessly as she got closer and closer. I felt things spiraling out of control in the worst way possible.

Amatena brought me to a grey building on the edge of town.

The building stood smack in the middle of a forest, as if hiding from prying eyes. It was immense, probably bigger than some castles. Certainly several times the size of the hall where I had seen the mass wedding.

I noticed something else, too: the walls had gentle undulations to them. From above, maybe the place looked like a domed baseball stadium or horse racing track.

The one thing I didn't understand was what on earth it was for.

There were what seemed to be guards by the entrance, so this was probably some sort of military installation. But other than the people posted by the door, I didn't see anyone who looked like a soldier anywhere. Don't most military installations have, like, attached training grounds, and aren't they usually crawling with soldiers?

"Where are we?" I asked. "What is this place?" But Amatena, who was walking a little ahead of me, gave no answer. She didn't even look back. Maybe she was angry?

If she wasn't even going to look in my direction, I briefly considered taking advantage of the fact to run away, but I soon gave up on the idea. I suspected Amatena was a much faster runner than I was, and even if I managed to get a head start without being noticed, there were soldiers right there at the door.

And so my only choice was to follow Amatena obediently.

The hallway inside was dim and totally spartan. The walls and floor were all made of either stone or brick, with no decorations anywhere. The sturdy but bleak appearance of the place suggested a prison. Were they just going to throw me in jail for not listening to them? Was I going to go from a cute little one-story flat with a cute little roommate to a prison cell? I guess that's what happens when you defy the state in a dictatorship...

"Are you planning to put me in prison?" I asked, but Amatena, of course, didn't answer.

She did, however, glance back at me over her shoulder, never slackening her pace.

"Huh? Wh—Wha?"

Was I seeing things? Or was that pity in the look she gave me?

So... not jail? Did they have something even worse in mind?

Surely not... execution?!

Guillotine. Hanging. Firing squad. Well, this world didn't have guns, so probably not firing squad. Boiling alive, maybe. Buried up to my neck in the ground, after which they would saw off my head. Tied to a team of horses that would tear me apart—I'd read about that somewhere, hadn't I? *No, no, no, stop.*

I reviled my own imagination, which kept conjuring the worst possible fates for me.

As all these visions swirled in my brain, we went down a flight of stairs, and then down another hallway, until...

"Now, look," Amatena said, coming to a stop.

We were at a balcony—or rather, sort of a catwalk, which jutted out from the wall two stories up. Below was a five-meter drop... down to a massive round pit that had to be at least fifty meters in diameter.

This, too, was made of stone—or maybe, like Eldant Castle, it had been hollowed out from a giant piece of rock, because just like that building, I saw no seams anywhere. Here and there I saw steel tablets engraved with lettering that looked a lot like the characters on my magic ring. They were some kind of magic device, but what?

No—the details didn't matter here. What was really important was the thing sitting in the middle of the pit.

No again—not *thing*. That was...

"A puppet drake...!"

It was a dragon with a magical spike driven into its forehead, just like the one we had seen on the set of our movie not so long ago. It seemed to be unconscious or something, because it was lying placidly on the floor, not so much as twitching. The gentle rising and falling of its back, though, made it obvious that the dragon wasn't dead. It was breathing. It was alive.

"So you recognize it," Amatena said.

"Er... Yeah. There was one that got into Eldant a while ago..."

Garius had speculated that maybe it was some new magical weapon Bahairam had developed, and it looked like he was right.

"This is where our military does its research," Amatena said. "And what we've chiefly been researching lately is puppetry technology."

"So you can control dragons with spikes like that?"

"Not just dragons," she replied. "Dragons are quasi-sprite beings, so magic has a minimal effect on them. That's what necessitates such a large

control device. The technology isn't perfect yet, but its practicality has been amply demonstrated. A less massive life form might require only a spike small enough to hold in the palm of the hand."

"A less massive life form..."

I didn't like where this was going.

Pretty much any life form would be "less massive" compared to that dragon. Say, for example...

"A human," Amatena said.

"Wait... Y-You can't mean..." My eyes went wide. "You'd put a spike like that in a human's head?"

"Indeed. As we will in yours."

That caught me completely off guard; I could only swallow heavily.

Okay, maybe not *completely* off guard. I might have had an inkling. After all, it only made sense that technology like this would get smaller and smaller, until the point when it could be used on a person—and then it would practically be a cliché to use it on the protagonist's friends or family and turn them into his enemies and *oh no, what is he going to do?!*

Right. Maybe not the time to be worrying about tropes.

"Wh-What the hell?! No way, quit it!"

"This decision comes from my superiors."

"Superiors?! I thought everyone lower than the father-ruler was supposed to be equal!"

Calm down, self! This wasn't the moment for smart remarks.

But calming down was a lot easier said than done.

"You've brought this on your own disgusting self by refusing to accede to our demands," Amatena said. "But I couldn't bring myself to make you a puppet while you were ignorant. I brought you here so you would understand."

"I think your kindness is little misplaced!" I shot back, but Amatena's expression still didn't shift.

Argh... I didn't know how big a spike for human use was, but if they were going to be pounding it into my head, I figured any size was too big. Presumably, being made a puppet meant I wouldn't be able to move my own body anymore, but what would happen to my consciousness? Would *I* disappear while they controlled me like a machine, or a zombie?

Heck, that pretty much meant I was going to die!

.....

.....Hey.

Hang on a second.

“If—If you spike me, how can I make your story or myth or whatever? My consciousness is going to disappear, right? A doll can’t come up with a story!”

“I’m afraid that’s no longer the issue,” Amatena said. “We’ve given up on that.”

“What, already?!”

“However, we did invest a certain amount of time and resources in bringing you here. We can’t simply write that off. We need some kind of return on our investment.”

“B-But I—”

“From what I hear,” Amatena said, narrowing her eyes at me, “you come from another world. You got to Eldant through some sort of ‘hole.’”

“.....Uh, well...”

So what?!

Wait, hold on. Did Bahairam even know about *that*?!

I guess it wasn’t exactly top-secret information, but still...

“Consider this a test of whether our puppetry magic is effective on offworlders. It will be good to know in the long run. Because after we conquer the Eldant Empire, Kanou Shinichi, I have to assume that our next target will be through that portal.”

“Wha—?!”

They had territorial ambitions that would have made Toyotomi Hideyoshi blush!

As I stood there in shock, two soldiers came up beside me and took my arms.

“Take him away.”

“Ma’am!”

The soldiers began to drag me off.

Whoa, wait! You’re gonna do it right now?!

“Take him to Solitary Seven in the second tower. Kanou Shinichi, when a date is set for your conversion, I’ll let you know. Until then, make yourself ready.”

“Oh, so, not right now. Phew. That’s a relief. ...Wait, no it’s not!” I

flailed about as best I could, given that my arms were pinned. “I give, I’ll do it! I’ll write your story or your myth or your epic poem or whatever you want!”

I wasn’t proud of myself, but sometimes life doesn’t leave you with any choices. I was just desperate not to die. And also not to have a magical spike pounded into my skull that would turn me into an unconscious doll, which was as good as dying.

Amatena glanced at me as I struggled. Had my pathetic begging worked?

“What has been decided cannot be revoked.”

“Oh, shi—!”

I tried to resist with all my might, but all the might of a former home security guard isn’t much compared to two professional soldiers. I kicked my legs like a tantruming child as the soldiers marched me down the hallway.

As she watched me go, I heard Amatena murmur, “I wanted to avoid this outcome.”

“Well, you still can! Do something!”

But she only looked at the ground.

Dammit, why did she have to be so quick to give up on everything?!

“Nooo! I don’t want any surgery! Just five minutes with a laser scalpel! Actually, that would be pretty awful, too!”

I had stopped making sense even to myself. For some reason, “Dona Dona” started running unbidden through my mind as the soldiers dragged me helplessly down the long corridor.

Elvia-san led us to a place called Borfoi, the “eastern city.” We arrived about when sunset was turning everything red.

In the Holy Eldant Empire, the streets would be busy this time of day with people coming back from their jobs and merchants trying to make one last sale for the day. Smoke and friendly aromas would be billowing from the stoves of all the houses where people were making dinner.

But in Borfoi, none of that was happening.

Yes, we saw people, and we did smell dinner cooking. But it was all... almost frighteningly homogenous. The people all wore identical clothes and walked in straight, silent lines, going back to houses that all looked the same. Smoke rose from every house, but instead of all the different smells of different dishes mingling together, a single simple, spicy aroma prickled our noses, as if every house was making the exact same meal.

There was no question the city was attractive and orderly. But it was... a little *too* orderly.

And...

"So," Minori-sama said.

Elvia-san was guiding us through a series of back streets where we wouldn't have to worry who might see us. She said she had lived in Borfoi for a while and knew the place pretty well.

"You think this is the city, Elvia?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "The younger of my older sisters lives here. She's with the military, and she's doing pretty well for her age. I bet she might know something about Shinichi-sama."

"The older sister is a soldier, and the younger a spy," Minori-sama said. "Is your whole family military?"

"Well, yeah, kind of." Elvia-san scratched her cheek as if embarrassed. "My father and mother are both soldiers, too. And my sisters. Pretty important ones. I'm... kind of the only one who hasn't made anything of herself."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just not that interested in fame or martial arts or anything. If I can draw my pictures, then I'm happy."

But, it seemed, artistic pursuits were deemed to have no practical value in Bahairam, and therefore to be worthless.

"No matter how good I get at my art," Elvia-san said, "it won't feed me or my family."

It was understandable, then, that she might feel ill at ease in a military household.

"Is that why you became a spy, Elvia?" Minori-sama asked.

"Yeah, pretty much."

Spying would allow her to draw as part of her work. And it would keep her from being compared to her siblings or her parents. And so...

“Oh! There it is,” Elvia-san said, coming to a stop and pointing at a particular house. Even with her pointing, I couldn’t tell it apart from all the other houses.

“Looks like she just got back,” Elvia-san said.

True, if I squinted, I could make out some lights through the window, and what appeared to be a person moving around inside.

“I’ll go have a chat with her.”

“Hold on, Elvia,” Minori-sama said. She produced some kind of small stick from her bag. “Take this. Attach it to yourself like this.” As she spoke, she stuck the stick to Elvia-san’s chest.

“Whazzis?”

“Just a little magic item for you. There, all set.” She gave Elvia-san a pat on the chest. “Good luck!”

“Sure. You two just wait here where no one can see you.”

Then, leaving her baggage with us, she set off toward her older sister’s house. I wondered if she would be able to find out from her where Shinichi-sama was. For that matter, I wondered if her older sister even knew.

I heaved an anxious sigh.

“Myusel,” Minori-sama said. She had something in her hand—her sumart fone. She was running her finger across its surface. “Perfect. Got it.” She nodded to herself.

“What’s this...?”

“That fown-ten-pen-shaped thing I stuck on Elvia’s chest is sending us video over the ayr wayves, so... Er, I guess this isn’t making any sense to you. The point is, it’s magic that lets us see what’s happening inside.” Then she showed me the fone.

It was showing “video,” a sort of moving image much like what we could see on the tell-evision and compyuuter at school. Elvia-san was just meeting her sister. We saw a girl with white hair.

“Wow,” Minori-sama whistled. She must have been surprised. I know I was.

On the sumart fone was someone who looked exactly like Elvia-san. The only difference was, her hair was as white as an elderly person’s. That simple contrast made her look like a completely different person—but her face was identical to Elvia-san’s.

It felt very strange.

“Sorry, Myusel,” Minori-sama said. “My magic ring won’t work like this. Think you could interpret?”

“Oh, yes.”

The rings could only communicate meaning when two people were speaking face-to-face. Because everything was being sent over the fone, Minori-sama could no longer understand what Elvia-san was saying.

“I ask you, Elvia. What is the meaning and reason for your coming here?”

“Umm...”

In my mind, I struggled to make sense of what I was hearing. Bahairam’s language was basically the same as that of Eldant, or at least, it sprang from the same source. But their accent was extremely heavy, and the conjugation rules were different. Combined with some unusual ways of speaking, I found I couldn’t translate it into neat Eldant. It was all I could do just keep track of what everything meant, and it all came out sounding oddly stiff.

“Your end of mission time is not yet, I understand. Why, why?”

“Agree, agree. But, but, I...”

Elvia-san sounded a little overwhelmed. Her “mission” must have been her spying. She floundered a little longer before saying:

“I hesitate. Big Sister Ama...” She seemed to collect her resolve, then said, *“I ask you. Kanou Shinichi. You know this name, yes, no?”*

Even I understood this much. She was asking very directly.

But her sister didn’t respond. Her face, which seemed largely expressionless, twisted into a look of anger. By which I mean she furrowed an eyebrow.

"Why? I shall ask, why do you know the name of Kanou Shinichi?"

The image shook. It must have been Elvia-san wincing with shock.

"Big Sister Ama—I shall ask, do you have some connection to Shinichi-sama?"

Elvia-san's sister appeared to get bigger until all we could see was her chest. Elvia-san must have gone closer to her. We couldn't see "Ama's" face, but we could still hear her.

"I shall ask," Elvia-san said. *"Big Sister Ama, you know where Shinichi-sama is, yes, no?"*

"'Shinichi-sama'?" Her sister's tone changed to one of suspicion. *"I shall ask, of what kind is the connection between you and Kanou Shinichi?"*

"I o-owe my... my life to him, probably."

"Your life?"

"My status, that I am a spy, was exposed. But Shinichi-sama, he, he protected me!"

"You..." Her sister's eyes narrowed. *"It can't be."*

"I shall ask. Big Sister Ama, are you connected to Shinichi-sama's kidnapping?"

"If I am, you will do what? I ask."

"I will seek, Shinichi-sama's return! Back to us!"

"'Return.' 'Shinichi-sama.' 'Us.'" Her sister spoke softly, one eyebrow raised.

"Big Sister Ama, I seek. Shinichi-sama, he—"

"Unfathomable!" her sister shouted. *"You underachieving good-for-nothing! You shame the Harneiman household, also the entire family of Bahairam! You fail to complete your mission, and become instead the kept dog of an enemy nation! Such failure is difficult to forgive!"*

She sounded immensely angry. I found myself shrinking back, even though there was a sumart fone between me and her.

"I refuse this is betrayal. I, I, seek only Shinichi-sama's rescue—"

"I would call that betrayal! Do you turn against the father-ruler?!"

"I..."

Elvia-san's voice grew pinched.

"A fool and a fool is what you are! Examine your own words! What you absorbed in Eldant I do not know, but—"

Suddenly, Big Sister had a sword out.

She had drawn it so fast I hadn't even seen her move. I doubted Minori-sama had, either. It was as if we heard it after it happened.

"I cannot endure to have this living stain upon us any longer! Judgment upon you I shall execute myself!"

I assumed the tip of the sword was at Elvia-san's neck. A careless movement could cut her throat.

But Elvia-san shook as if she were trying to hold something back, then shouted, *"Shinichi-sama! To him I owe my life! He has accepted me! Is it wrong to repay this debt?"*

At the other end of the outstretched sword, her sister appeared surprised. The two siblings glared at each other, a painful silence descending between them.

Finally, to my surprise, it was Elvia-san's sister who looked away, sighing wearily. She returned her sword to its scabbard.

Then she said, *"You are already too late."*

"What...?"

"It has already been decided of Kanou Shinichi, he shall be subjected to the puppet spike."

"Puppet spike...?"

I immediately thought of the dragon that had attacked our movie set. Shinichi-sama and Minori-sama had called it a "puppet drake." They had said it might be some new magical weapon Bahairam had developed.

Were they going to put a spike in Shinichi-sama's head just like they had with that dragon? The very thought made me queasy with fear.

"It is a magical nail that when inserted into the head of a living being makes them a puppet."

"Big Sister Ama! You would do such a thing to Shinichi-sama? Why, why?"

"For he does not listen to or accept our demands," Elvia-san's sister said flatly. *"Abilities such as his are not to be found in our nation. Our spies in Eldant report that his talents are quite valuable. They shall be useful in increasing the loyalty of the children to the father-ruler."*

Elvia-san didn't speak.

"But that vile creature has refused us. It demanded time and money to bring him here, and we shall not be left empty-handed. We seek only practical benefit. Thus, he shall serve as a test subject for a human-sized

spike...”

“Refuse! Stop! Absolutely—absolutely! Shinichi-sama saved my life! Big Sister Ama, will you take revenge on the one who saved your younger sister?”

“Silence, betrayer.” Her sister’s eyes narrowed again. *“Or have you had relations with Kanou Shinichi?”*

“I—”

Even I could tell Elvia-san was thrown off by this.

“I hear that in Eldant, the partner for relations is highly valued. You time as a spy too long, have you been poisoned by Eldant customs? Fool! Idiot! To be so attached to the partner of your relations that you would turn against the father-ruler—against the family of Bahairam! Fool of fools!”

“Family? What family?”

Elvia-san’s voice had taken on a dark cast. Bitter, almost hateful. Aggressive. It was the first time I had ever heard the normally cheerful girl sound that way, and it shook me.

“Are you and I family, Big Sister Ama, yes, no?! We are sisters by blood, born of the same parents! But a good-for-nothing is not part of the family?”

“It was you who first sought to betray—who first sought to be out from this family of Bahairam...”

“It was you *who first abandoned me!”*

For the first time, her sister seemed lost for words.

“Shinichi-sama accepted me, this I shall never forget! Without blood connection, without community or family, though I was of another race! He accepted and recognized me for who I was, and I shall not forget! My heart, my body, my very self, he—”

Elvia-san’s sister still didn’t respond.

“Ask me now who my family is, and I shall answer: it is not Bahairam, nor you, Big Sister Ama. It is Shinichi-sama and his household, Myusel, Minori-sama, Brooke, Cerise! All those who have accepted me!”

Her sister’s face twisted in what seemed like pain, perhaps even regret.

“I—”

“Begone,” her sister spat.

“I—”

“Begone, I order you!” There was a *slam!* as she punched the wall. *“Gone! You good-for-nothing! You traitor! Very now I deny your words. You*

are not my sister nor my family! You are my enemy!"

There was a very long, tense pause from Elvia-san. *"Well understood, but, Shinichi-sama's location—"*

"Out! Even at this moment! And twisted once-sister, once-family, I shall show you a final act of mercy. That I do not cut you down here with my blade, consider to be my final act of mercy!"

"Big Sister Ama...!"

"You worthless stain on the name of Harneiman! I do not stoop even to kill you so that you leave here a corpse! Run to your Eldant Empire, run to the edge of the world! Run like the shame you are!"

Elvia-san's sister appeared to get smaller—Elvia-san must have backed away. It was just a step, and yet to me it looked like an unbridgeable gulf between them.

"Now begone!"

The sister's form disappeared from the top of Minori-sama's sumart fone. Elvia-san must have turned around. We could see the image on the fone shaking violently...

"Well, that could have gone better," Minori-sama muttered.

The next thing we saw was Elvia-san emerging from her sister's house at a dead run.

Day two of my imprisonment.

They were keeping me in a stereotypical jail: stone floor, walls, and ceiling, and a door of iron bars. The cell was a surprisingly roomy ten mats, but maybe that only made sense. This was a facility for developing their puppet magic. It didn't actually have "solitary" cells. What it had was cages for observing the animals they were testing on—it wasn't designed with humans in mind. The space had to be big enough to house a large test subject.

Close inspection revealed several round openings close to the floor, each roughly the size of a fist, through which dirt could exit. When the floor of the cage started to get covered in excrement, they could just flush the whole thing out with water.

The only illumination came from a single lamp on the far side of the door; the place was dim. The only furniture in my room was a wooden chest apparently intended to serve as an impromptu bed. Well, there was one other thing—a bucket-sized cylinder against the back wall.

"Now what do I do?" I sighed, sitting on the bed.

I had initially worried that imprisonment might mean being put in manacles or restraints, but it seemed I was free to move about my cell.

"A jailbreak... is easier said than done, I guess."

I had learned two spells from Myusel, so I wasn't completely defenseless even though I was unarmed. But the wind spell Tifu Murottsu, the only offensive magic I knew, couldn't be used several times in quick succession—or at least, a beginner like me wasn't capable of it. Plus, there was no telling what might happen if I used it in a confined space like this. It certainly wouldn't have any effect on the bars of the door, and if it bounced off the hard stone walls I could end up hit by my own magic. And how stupid would that be?

There was something else, though. If I squinted and ran my fingers along the wall beside my bed, I could make out tiny depressions and bumps in the surface. It obviously wasn't just decoration, and it felt vaguely like the characters inscribed in my magic ring. Chances were good that the wall itself was enchanted.

I recalled Petralka saying she had magic-resisting spells on her own body, so maybe Bahairam could do the same sort of thing. Something to neutralize magic seemed especially important when you were working with creatures like dragons, which could absorb magical power and control fire sprites.

Long story short, any plan to break out of this jail using Tifu Murottsu was over before it began.

In movies, people have all kinds of ways out of prison: faking illness, hiding behind walls, ambushing the guard who brings their food. As for me, I didn't know the layout of the building, so even if I managed to get out of my cell, I would have no idea how to actually escape.

No, stop. Negative thinking makes even the possible look impossible. And when the alternative is just sitting around until you get a spike stuck in your head, turning you into a living corpse, even a doomed plan is worth a shot.

“What the heck is this, anyway?”

I would have to use every single thing at my disposal. With that in mind, I went over to the only other object in the room besides my bed: the cylindrical bucket. It appeared to be ceramic. And yes, it was about the size of a bucket, with two handles. It had a lid on top.

Wondering what it was, I pulled the lid open... and my nose was immediately assaulted by a disgusting stench.

I squeezed one eye shut as I looked inside, but it was empty. That must mean the smell had soaked into the material of the container...

“Wait... Is this a chamber pot?!”

This was supposed to be my *toilet*?!

I quickly slammed the lid back down, sighing at how pathetic the whole thing was. At that moment...

“Shinichi.”

I heard someone call my name through the bars. I didn’t have to look to know who it was. There were only two people in this country who knew my name: Clara and Amatena. If they didn’t use *-sama*, then it had to be Amatena..... But wait. Didn’t she usually call me by my full name?

“I want to talk to— No. Let me start over.”

Amatena was on the other side of the bars. She looked away, unable to meet my eyes.

“Huh?” What was the story with that?

In my failure to understand, I briefly dropped my gaze to the ground, where I saw the chamber pot.

“Wh-Whoa, wait! It’s not like that! I wasn’t trying to... to do my business or anything!”

I jumped as far away from the chamber pot as I could. Amatena still wasn’t looking at me. Why was it that she could talk about “relations” with a completely straight face, but was embarrassed to walk in on someone answering nature’s call? Not that I was eager to be seen like that or anything.

“I was just like, *I’ve never seen one of these before, I wonder what it is?* So I...”

“I see.” She turned toward me again, the misunderstanding resolved. Standing there on the other side of the bars, Amatena looked... tired, somehow.

Her expression was as flat as ever, though, so maybe I was just imagining things.

"There's something I want to ask you, filth." She leaned back against the wall and crossed her arms.

"Ask? Me?"

Insofar as she was granting me a stay of execution (by which I mean she hadn't come to tell me they had set a date for my surgery), I was little relieved. Of course, she could always lead me away to have the procedure done the moment we were finished talking...

"Do you know Elvia?"

"......Huh?" Of all the possible topics I thought she might conceivably raise, this was not the one I expected. "Why bring her up now?"

"You don't want to talk about her?"

"I don't mind, it's just..."

What was it she was really trying to ask? Maybe they really were sisters, and she was trying to find out how Elvia was doing at her spying job. (Sadly the answer was, pretty poorly.)

"She is the youngest of us sisters," Amatena said. "Is it true that you saved her life?"

"Huh?" (Again.) "Er, ah, y-yeah... Yeah, I guess you could say that." I gave a noncommittal nod.

Truth be told, I had just been so moe for my first beast girl at that moment, not to mention loath to lose Elvia's artistic abilities, that I didn't really think of myself as saving her life. More like I just happened to do what was best for me, which also just happened to be what was best for her not being executed.

I explained all this to Amatena.

"What is this *moe*?"

"Oh, uh... In my country's language, it means... like, 'cute' or 'highly attractive.' Elvia is so cheerful and outgoing, and super adorable. Okay, so she gets ahead of herself sometimes, but even that's kind of charming."

Amatena didn't say anything.

"Plus, she's really good at drawing. It worked out great for me, because it was really convenient for my work, having a capable artist around. I just thought it would suck to let them go and execute her..."

"And that was your reasoning?" Amatena shook her head as if to say I

made no sense at all. “You should know, Elvia is—”

“Come to think of it, when I first saw you, Amatena, I thought maybe Elvia had changed her hair color somehow.”

The two of them really, really looked like each other.

That was when I realized what I had just effectively said.

Elvia is cute. Elvia and Amatena look like each other. Therefore, Amatena is cute.

What was I saying? What was I saying to someone who belonged to a group of people that wanted to pound a magical spike into my head?

What, did I expect Amatena to blush and giggle like we were in some gal game, then help me escape? I mean, that would be exceedingly convenient right about now, but even I wasn’t stupid enough to think it might happen. I didn’t even remember tripping any flags for Amatena.

“I see,” Amatena said after a moment. Was it just me, or had her voice and expression softened ever so slightly? Was she just happy to hear me speak kindly about her sister?

“You two... You and Elvia. You really are each other’s spitting images.”

“Of course we are,” Amatena said. “We are triplets.”

“Triplets?!”

“Why is this so surprising?” Amatena looked at me questioningly for a moment before she seemed to realize what was going on and said, “Ah, I see. Among humans, it is normal to bear only one child at a time, is it not?”

“Huh? Are twins and triplets more common for werewolves?”

“It would be quite unusual to have only one cub in a litter.”

“Uh... huh.”

Now that I thought about it, dogs were a symbol of safe birth exactly because they tended to have easy deliveries despite bearing a lot of young. It was perfectly typical for dogs and cats to have several offspring at once, and werewolves did appear to be more like dogs or wolves than humans.

“So you became a soldier, Amatena. What about the third child?”

“My older sister, Jijilea, is also a soldier. As are my mother and father. There are many such in my family. You could say the only one who didn’t become a proper soldier was that little fool.” She whispered, pained.

Oopsie. I had to say, I couldn’t picture Elvia as a soldier.

“She was a failure. She became a spy in hopes of escaping that fact.”

So that was it: two successful, distinguished sisters, and the runt. That

couldn’t have been any fun for Elvia. Thanks to my life with Shizuki, I knew what it was like to have an endlessly gifted sister. I hadn’t been thrilled.

You had the ones who became soldiers and stuck around Bahairam. Then you had the one who became a spy infiltrating into enemy territory. Yeah, they were both technically military, but they were very different positions.

Had Amatena deliberately been avoiding the subject of Elvia until now? Maybe she hadn’t wanted to even acknowledge that “failure” existed? Amatena was so serious, and having a younger sister who couldn’t hack it wouldn’t have done her any favors while she was trying to get ahead in the world...

Amatena was muttering to herself now. “I can’t believe this. She was always so soft and indecisive, just following along behind everyone else. And then she would pick the strangest times to show resolution, to rebel... When she became a spy, she did it without even talking to the rest of us...”

I didn’t feel like I heard any anger or hatred toward Elvia in her voice. It was almost like... “the more hopeless they get, the cuter they are.” A sort of fond resignation. Then again, maybe I was just reading too much into it.

I wasn’t completely sure, but I thought just maybe, for the first time, I was hearing how Amatena really felt.

“She’s family. She’s your sister. Of course you’d worry about her.”

“Indeed. But that idiot—”

Then she stopped cold. She frowned; it was obvious she’d said more than she meant to.

Finally she let out a single sigh and heaved herself off the wall.

“I’ve been here longer than I meant.” She took a step closer to the iron-barred door—a step closer to me—and said, “Incidentally, your spiking has been set for tomorrow.”

“Guh?!”

What was with the informational ambush?!

I thought we were just getting to a good place! Give me back my expectations! Wait a second... Tomorrow?! Like, the day after this one? Like, *ashita*?! She was kidding, right?!

“That was what I came to tell you in the first place,” Amatena said. Then she turned away from me and made to leave, her footsteps tapping

hurriedly over the stone floor.

“But tomorrow is—”

I looked at my watch. It was currently six in the evening. I didn’t know exactly when tomorrow they had in mind, but one thing was for sure: within roughly the next thirty hours, I would have a magical spike in my brain.

The one thing I definitely did not have was any way out of this situation.

“Oh, man...”

Now, at last, despair washed over me. Unable to withstand it, I threw myself on the bed. I didn’t know exactly what Bahairam’s magic was like, but I suspected having a spike pounded into your head and being turned into a zombie was likely to rank just below dying on the Fun-O-Meter. Not to mention, I was guessing this meant no going back to Eldant or Japan for me.

I think normally, a person would think of their parents or lover at a moment like this. But what I saw was the faces of all my Eldant friends.

Myusel. Minori-san. Petralka. Elvia. Brooke. Cerise. Garius. Prime Minister Zahar. Everyone at school. Even Matoba-san...

I wondered what they were up to at that moment. I liked to think they were worried when I suddenly disappeared. (Well... Maybe not Matoba-san so much.)

I gazed up at the bare ceiling of my jail cell and let out a long, disconsolate sigh.

The city was already draped in the darkness of night. We could see the bluish glow of sprite-powered lamps here and there, but they weren’t very bright, leaving swaths of the town in darkness. Somehow, the panoply of shadows lying over the cold, gray town made it seem like there was a series of bottomless pits waiting for us to fall in. It was terribly eerie.

Maybe I only felt that way because we were in Bahairam. Or perhaps...

“She’s here,” Minori-sama whispered. We were right next to the home of Elvia-san’s older sister, Amatena-san. We were in a deserted back alley, hiding in the shadows. Elvia-san was with us, of course. “Just like we planned.”

“Got it,” Elvia-san said, nodding to Minori-sama.

Amatena-san had already refused to tell Elvia-san about Shinichi-sama’s location once, but we had nothing else to go on. With no idea where he was or when they might be planning to put the magical spike in him, our only

option was to get the information from Amatena-san.

By force, if necessary.

Minori-sama and Elvia-san stalked out of the shadows together.

They stopped right in front of Amatena-san, who was just coming down the street toward her house.

“Big Sister Ama!”

Amatena-san didn’t appear at all surprised, but only raised an eyebrow at Elvia-san. “Who’s this woman? An Eldant soldier?”

“I’m not technically from the Eldant Empire,” Minori-sama said with a shrug, “but I guess you could say I’m in about the same position as Elvia.”

“Hmph. Another offworlder.”

“You got it. So you guys do know about that.” Minori-sama sounded a bit disappointed. “Looks like it’s leaks left, right, and center... Arrgh!”

“Big Sister Ama! I want you to tell us where Shinichi-sama is.”

“You’re wasting your breath,” Amatena-san spat. “I have no intention of telling a traitor anything. You should be grateful I haven’t yet reported you to my superiors.”

“So you really won’t tell me?” Elvia-san asked, not quite able to look at her sister. “You won’t help, no matter what?”

“I told you to stop wasting your breath. What do you think you can do if I refuse?”

I suspected Amatena-san had some idea. She had to assume there was a reason for Elvia-san showing herself again. Even from a distance, I could feel the air between Amatena-san, Minori-sama, and Elvia-san get tense.

“Force it is, then!”

Minori-sama and Elvia-san moved almost simultaneously. Minori-sama let loose a spinning roundhouse aimed at Amatena-san’s abdomen. It moved so fast I thought I could hear it whoosh through the air, yet Amatena-san blocked it with her upraised left arm.

“You—!”

With her other hand, Amatena-san went for the sword at her hip.

But Elvia-san was coming at her from the opposite direction. Her fist appeared to be aimed directly at her sister’s face.

“Yaaaahh!”

But she changed direction in mid-strike, driving her fist toward the stomach. Amatena-san must have seen the trick coming, though, because

she brought up a leg and sent Elvia-san flying with a kick.

"Ugh!" Elvia-san gasped.

To my surprise, though, Amatena-san grimaced and grunted, "Hrm?"

It was because she no longer had a sword. Elvia-san had grabbed onto it with all four limbs when she went flying, pulling it away. That had been her objective all along.

"Hah!"

"Hrr—!"

Minori-sama was already moving into her next attack. Her fist flew with tremendous speed, but Amatena-san blocked her with the palm of one hand.

Minori-sama let loose another blow, and another and another. Fists, feet, elbows. But Amatena-san deflected or blocked most of them, and Minori-sama never managed to hit her anywhere important. Yes, she landed a few glancing blows, but nothing decisive.

She's so strong!

I was sure Minori-sama wasn't holding back, yet she couldn't defeat Amatena-san. And this was the woman who had gone hand-to-hand with a dragon!

Perhaps seeing that she wasn't getting anywhere, Minori-sama backed off and made some distance.

A human couldn't best a werewolf when it came to stamina and sheer brute strength. If the fight went on too long, it was undoubtedly Minori-sama who would run out of steam first.

"Elvia is predictably disappointing, but you—" Amatena-san said, narrowing her eyes. "You are a talented fighter. Who are you?"

"I don't have to answer that," Minori-sama said. "For that matter, who are *you*? I assumed you'd be a pushover like Elvia—"

"I encourage you not to underestimate me. I'm embarrassed even to hear myself compared to that good-for-nothing failure."

"Eeyaaahhh!"

Elvia-san flung the sword aside and launched herself at Amatena-san once more. She closed the distance immediately, her limbs flailing wildly in hopes of landing a blow on her sister. The violence of it was incredible; she used the full strength and agility of a werewolf. If she'd been attacking me, I probably would have gone down in a single hit. Every strike had the power to kill, and they came in a flurry almost too fast for the eye to follow.

But of course, none of that mattered if the blows didn't land.

Amatena-san blocked and passed every single one of Elvia-san's strikes without so much as appearing nervous. It was abundantly obvious that Elvia-san alone would never beat Amatena-san. The difference in their abilities was simply too great.

"Pathetic, as ever," she said. "Haah!"

She sent Elvia-san flying again with another kick.

Elvia-san was in the air, and then, an instant later, so was Amatena-san, jumping straight up.

"Hrk—?!" Minori-sama, who had somehow gotten behind Amatena-san, gave a tremendous sweep through the place where the other woman had been standing until an instant before.

Her defense was impenetrable; it was as if she had eyes in the back of her head. What was more, Amatena-san twisted in the air so that she came down behind Minori-sama. A trained tumbler couldn't have done it better. Minori-sama turned and punched, but this too Amatena-san blocked. In fact, unbelievably, she grabbed the fist in midair, leaving Minori-sama's movements constricted.

"Hiyah!" With a sharp exhalation, Amatena-san drove a punch straight into Minori-sama's solar plexus.

"Hrgh!" Minori-sama tried to pass the strike, but with her right hand immobilized, she didn't have a chance. She wasn't able to brace herself; with a painful little gasp, she dropped to one knee.

Amatena-san was truly powerful. Too powerful.

Almost unable to believe what I was seeing, I felt a tremor run through my body. We had known that a werewolf like Amatena-san was going to be physically powerful and very quick. That was why we had decided to have Minori-sama and Elvia-san attack her together. But we had never counted on Amatena-san being so tremendously skilled in unarmed combat.

Now Elvia-san was lying on the ground, and Minori-sama was down on one knee. Amatena-san, however, didn't look like she was planning to finish either of them off. Most likely, she felt she had made her point: even when they attacked her simultaneously, she had gotten the better of them with almost no effort. This wasn't a show of pride; it was a simple fact.

But it was also—not an opening, exactly; but just what I was looking for.

I had already chanted my spell. This was why I had stayed in the shadows. Now, when Minori-sama and Elvia-san weren't involved in combat with Amatena-san, was my best opportunity.

"*Tifu Murottsu*!"

The moment my magic activated, I saw Amatena-san make a movement as if she were tossing something.

I realized almost immediately that it was a bladed object glittering in the moonlight. Almost before I could think, my hand was pointing toward it. The wind sprites gathered in my palm went where my fingers were pointed —in this case, flying at and knocking away the small object.

It was a shuriken. It spun away from me and buried itself in the ground nearby.

Startled, I began to intone a second spell. If you used the same spell twice in a row, you could execute it the second time with less than half the incantation necessary for the—

But in the next instant, Amatena-san filled my vision.

"Eeek!"

I felt myself being grabbed by the collar and spun around in a wide arc before I slammed against the ground. I had fallen on my back, and the force of the impact knocked the air from my lungs. For a fraction of a second, I felt myself grow faint from the pain.

I let out a gasping cough.

"Myusel!" I heard Minori-sama calling out to me, but I didn't have the wherewithal to call back. More specifically, I was coughing so hard that I couldn't form words.

"Ugah!"

My situation got worse when Amatena-san followed up by wrapping my neck in a choke.

It was the natural and indeed necessary thing to do against an enemy who could use magic. First, you stopped them from breathing so they couldn't incant any spells. Using throws and chokes instead of strikes allowed you to attack while simultaneously preventing the use of magic.

"Aggghh!" I grabbed at Amatena-san's arm, trying to pry it off my neck, but my physical strength was no match for that of a werewolf. My vision was starting to turn red when suddenly, Elvia-san jumped at Amatena-san from behind.

“Let Myusel go!”

Amatena-san, however, kept her right hand wrapped around my neck while executing a half-turn and using her left to grab Elvia-san’s face. Elvia-san’s fist never reached Amatena-san; instead, the elder sister used her grip on the younger’s head to force her to the ground beside me.

“Ee-eyowowowow!”

It seemed like she was hurt less by going to the ground than by the fingers digging into her cheeks and grasping her hair. Elvia-san struggled and flailed her limbs, but Amatena-san never let go.

“Give up, Elvia,” Amatena-san said, her face impassive.

“I won’t,” Elvia-san managed to gasp. “I won’t! I won’t! I never will!”

“Elvia—”

“I never, never, never will!” she shouted, thrashing wildly.

“Idiot! Is this man so important to you?” I thought there was a hint of annoyance in her voice. “Is he so—”

“Yes!” Elvia-san finally stopped her ineffectual writhing, instead planting both her hands on the hand Amatena-san was using to hold her face, as if she thought she could simply crush it.

“Hrrgh...”

They might not have had equal skills, but they were still both werewolves. In a simple contest of strength, they might be almost equal. Pain began to twist Amatena-san’s expression.

“Myusel! Elvia!”

No sooner had we heard the shout than a blinding flash washed over us. Amatena-san had looked back at the sound of the voice; the light had probably blinded her.

Even so, she didn’t loosen her grip on my throat or Elvia-san’s face.

“Hiyah!”

That was when I saw Minori-sama, a shadow against the light, send a kick flying at Amatena-san.

She immediately brought up her hands in an attempt at defense, but couldn’t take up her stance quickly enough—so Minori-sama’s blow sent her flying.

“Urgh!”

There was a dry thump as she rolled along the ground. Maybe the kick hadn’t been square enough, though, because she rose up immediately; even

though she was still on one knee, I see she was ready to fight.

"Myusel, Elvia, are you okay?" Minori-sama asked, moving over to us. She was still focused on Amatena-san, and there was some kind of short, black stick in her right hand. It seemed to be this stick that had produced the light.

"Jeez," Minori-sama said, "I was worried there. I wasn't able to use my pistol. Good thing I brought my SureFire from home, huh?"

"Huh? Huh..."

She obviously thought I should agree with her, but I didn't really know what I was agreeing to. In any event, Elvia-san had already climbed to her feet and lent me a hand as I got off the ground.

Amatena-san, meanwhile, seemed wary of the light; she took up a fighting stance but didn't make any big movements. Now that we knew exactly how strong she was, though, we couldn't afford to attack her indiscriminately, either. I could try chanting magic, but without the element of surprise, Amatena-san would just dodge me.

That was when, to my surprise, Minori-sama suddenly turned back, the hand with her "SureFire" waving. There was a screech of metal and then a flash.

Two shuriken buried themselves in the wall of the nearest building. They were the same sort of weapon Amatena-san had used earlier, but this time I was sure she hadn't moved. They seemed to have come from the opposite direction.

"Elder sister, are you all right?" someone asked as they emerged from the darkness. This new person was a weretiger girl wearing a military uniform much like Amatena-san's. However, she appeared to be about ten years younger, and her hair and fur were a light brown.

"Clara," Amatena-san said quietly. That must have been the girl's name.

Clara produced two more throwing stars from her sleeve and prepared to use them.

"This looks bad," Minori-sama whispered.

This still made us three on two. But if Clara was as powerful as Amatena-san, then our numerical advantage wasn't going to be much advantage at all.

In fact, I could hear footsteps rushing in from every direction. It seemed the sound of our fighting had attracted other people in the area. There was

no way we were going to win now. It looked like we had been caught.

“I think it’s time for a tactical retreat,” Minori-sama said softly. “Myusel, Elvia, hold my hands.”

Then she took some kind of cylinder out of her bag, pulled a needle-like thing out of it, and tossed the cylinder on the ground.

What in the world was she doing?

No sooner had the question crossed my mind than a thick smoke began billowing out of the cylinder.

“What?!” Amatena-san exclaimed.

The white smoke immediately filled the narrow alleyway, until I couldn’t even see my hand in front of my face. I suspected our opponents couldn’t see anything either. Minori-sama pulled me and Elvia-san by the hand down the street.

“Sister!” I heard Clara shout through the smoke.

“Don’t pursue them, Clara!” Amatena-san said back. “I need you to contact the research facility holding center. Inform them that bandits may be targeting Kanou Shinichi. Tell them not to take their eyes off him until he’s at the treatment center for his conversion tomorrow at noon!”

“Ma’am!”

I could hear the patter of Clara’s feet as she ran in another direction.

“Minori-sama,” I whispered.

“Yeah, I got it,” she said. I couldn’t even see her face for the smoke, but I could hear the smile in her voice. “For as bad as she beat us up, you’ve got a pretty nice sister, Elvia.”

“Huh?” Elvia-san sounded genuinely surprised. “Nice? What’s nice about her?”

“You heard her, right? Shinichi-kun is in a research facility holding center They’re going to move him from there to some sort of treatment center at noon tomorrow.”

“Oh...”

The droop in Elvia-san’s voice made it sound like she probably hadn’t realized what her sister was doing.

“Eh, I guess it could be false information to lure us into a trap,” Minori-sama said.

“If it was, she was awfully obvious about it.”

We got away from the smoke and let go of Minori-sama’s hands. Then

we set off running through town.

There were lights on in several buildings, perhaps people alerted by the commotion. We made out several faces watching us, but nobody seemed to be moving to stop us. I guess a little shouting and thumping wouldn't be enough for everyone to know we were enemies.

"Elvia, what do you think about this?" Minori-sama asked as we ran along. What she meant was, could we trust what Amatena-san had told us?

"Wh-Why're you askin' me?"

"Out of the three of us, you're the one who knows her best, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so, but..." Elvia-san sounded hesitant. That was understandable. They had been fighting, really and truly in combat, just moments ago. How would you know whether to trust someone like that?

We kept running in silence.

Huffing and puffing, I looked back, but it didn't seem like anyone was coming after us from the direction of town. At length we reached the shadow of a huge boulder sitting in the wilderness outside of town, and we were finally able to stop and catch our breath.

"About Big Sister Ama," Elvia-san said suddenly. "I don't think she's lying. If she was just going to lie, why tell us at all? Or why not wait until we were gone to tell that girl what to do?"

"Good points. I agree," Minori-sama said, a smile splitting her face. Then she patted Elvia-san on the back as if to comfort her.

Chapter Four: The Great Shinichi Rescue

I thought I had an idea now of how condemned prisoners must feel waiting to be executed.

My mouth was so dry I could hardly swallow. I was awake all night, but had nothing to do—I didn't even have any writing utensils to leave a will with—so I just tossed and turned on my bed, restlessly checking my watch.

"Time to go."

Soldiers showed up and ushered me out of my cell. Amatena wasn't one of them. It looked like she had finally decided to wash her hands of me.

They led me down the stone hallway, then out of the building. From the outside, the research facility looked like a single huge structure, but actually (apparently), the towering fence that enclosed the entire area hid several more buildings. I had been in "Storage," the building where they kept subjects for experiments, and now I was being ushered to "Procedures." The fact that I got to see the sky one more time before they did their work felt like a tiny blessing.

Then again, if I was going to try anything, this was literally my last chance.

There were five soldiers transporting me: three in front of me, two behind. All of them were carrying swords. Why no spears or axes? Maybe because they assumed they might have to fight inside the prison. It didn't really make a difference; for a complete combat layperson like me, the enemy could be armed with swords or spears or daggers. I was still gonna get stabbed.

So going toe-to-toe with them was out. I considered whether I could bowl some of them over with Tifu Murottsu. If I could somehow get the two behind me in front of me instead, then hit all of them at once, I might be able to knock them down. Of course, there was always the danger that they would notice me chanting, but if I were careful to do it softly and with

minimal lip movements, I might be able to pull it off.

"You," one of the soldiers behind me said, giving me a smack on the back of the head. "Pick up the pace."

"Y-Yeah, sorry."

Crap. Why did I reflexively apologize? Stupid me.

No! That's not the point!

This was very, very bad. If I chanted a magic spell, there was a distinct possibility I would be cut down on the spot.

A deep despair began to weigh on me.

"Ahh..."

I suddenly found I couldn't stop imagining moments from the past, memories that flitted through my mind. Was this what they meant when they said your life flashes before your eyes?

I thought of my life in Japan, with my parents and sister. I remembered being brutally shot down by my old friend when I confessed my feelings to her. I recalled shutting myself up in my room and doing nothing but playing online games, watching anime, participating on various major message boards, (etc., etc., etc.).

I remembered being deceived when I tried to apply for a job in Akihabara.

And then...

I remembered the first day I came to Eldant. Meeting Myusel and Minori-san. How much seeing Brooke shocked me. The way Petralka decked me when we first met. The day Elvia came to our house.

I remembered setting up the school, being captured by terrorists, getting to know Myusel and Petralka better and better, being attacked by the JSDF Special Forces, the soccer tournament, the movie production...

Yeah. It had all been a lot of fun. I felt like my life had really blossomed after I came to this world. And always it was thanks to Myusel and the others, thanks to the people of this world.

"Myusel..."

They had accepted me. A worthless otaku of a home security guard had come to them, and they had cared for me.

I really wish I could have seen everyone one last time.

And then there were all the anime and manga that hadn't yet finished their runs... You know, I remembered seeing an article in some magazine

about season two of *Rental ☆Madoka*. I wondered what they decided to do about the voice actors for the new characters. Plus, the computer game *Step on my Corpse 2* was supposed to be in production. Would it ever come out? And I had that *Kamen Rapper Weathered* model kit I had never built...

And on and on.

It appeared I was and would remain a lost-cause otaku to the bitter end.

But at that moment, one of the soldiers noticed something. I don't know who spotted it first, but one of them said, "H-Hey, what's that?"

All of them looked up. Almost unconsciously, I craned my neck, too.

And then just about choked at what I saw overhead.

The sun was so bright it hurt to look at the sky, but even so, I could tell immediately what I was seeing.

Smack in the middle of the endless blue field was a hovering shadow. A shadow that was getting closer by the second...

"*Dragon!*" the soldiers shouted, panic creeping into their voices.

They were right: it was definitely a dragon. And not one of the little domesticated wyverns the Eldant Dragon Knights used. This was several times—several dozen times—bigger, a monster so violent and dangerous that every country was perpetually on the alert for them. A real dragon.

Dragons, said to be part sprite, were the absolute apex predators of this world—and this one was coming straight down at me!

"Run—"

"No, get the puppet drake—"

"Call a mage!"

The terror of the dragon had sown evident confusion among the soldiers. This was my chance to escape! Or would have been, except that there was no particular reason a dragon would distinguish between me and the soldiers, meaning that I was probably still done for along with everyone else...

"Shinichi-samaaaa!"

"...Uh...?"

I don't mind saying I was pretty darn surprised at that moment. Maybe, I thought, the depression had grown so acute that I was starting to have auditory hallucinations. Because I was sure I had just heard a voice I couldn't possibly hear, the voice of a girl whose smiling face I could picture in my mind's eye even at that moment.

“Shinichi-sama!”

“It can’t be...”

I looked up again at the dragon, which actually appeared to be slowing as it came inexorably nearer.

I saw a face peek out from behind it. A face I knew.

“Shinichi-sama!”

She wasn’t dressed in her familiar maid uniform, but it didn’t matter. The person riding on the back of that dragon, reaching her arms out to me and desperately calling my name, was...

“Myusel?!”

“I’ve come to save you, Master!”

Looking up at her framed against the sun and the blue sky, I felt a rush of happiness, astonishment, and a slew of other emotions I couldn’t even put into words, so many feelings all at once that I thought I might just burst into tears.

With wind sprites supporting its wings, our Faldra landed in the courtyard of the facility (it was a bit of a squeeze). Released, the sprites went flying off in every direction, almost as if a large-scale Tifu Murottsu had been let off. It wasn’t enough to knock over the Bahairamanian soldiers nearby, but it certainly worked to confuse them.

Then there was Minori-sama, who jumped from the Faldra’s back shouting and with something called an “em-nyne” in each hand.

“Yaaaaaaaahhhhhh!”

There was a series of earsplitting cracks, and clouds of dust flew up from the ground ahead of us. I had to assume the enemy soldiers weren’t aware of how powerful the em-nynes were, but the noise combined with the tiny holes appearing in the earth must have alerted them that this was a weapon on par with offensive magic like Terab Redonas, the lightning spell. They quickly dove for the cover of a nearby building.

“Myusel!” Minori-sama called.

“Right!”

Just as we had planned, Minori-sama had drawn the Bahairamanian

soldiers' attention; now I jumped down from the Faldra, carrying the weapon I had borrowed from Minori-sama.

My objective, of course, was Shinichi-sama.

He was kneeling on the ground—he had probably been caught up in the whirlwind just like the soldiers. I went running toward him.

"Shinichi-sama!"

He didn't immediately answer, but only stared at me distantly. He was probably too shocked for words. At last he seemed to come back to himself; he blinked several times, then shouted, "Myusel! Behind you!"

I spun around and saw a Bahairamanian soldier, his sword coming down at me. I instinctively raised the weapon Minori-sama had given me.

Clang! It blocked the sword that was coming at me. But...

"Ergh..."

"You—!"

The soldier was forcing his blade down toward me. I simply didn't have the physical strength to resist a trained, male soldier. I found myself forced to one knee...

Then, suddenly, the pressure from above disappeared. In fact, the soldier went spinning through the air, then hit the ground hard enough to knock him unconscious. I stared at him in amazement.

"Shinichi-sama!"

Elvia-san, however, rushed past me. She must have pulled the soldier down from behind.

"Are y' okay?!" She hardly slowed down, all but slamming into Shinichi-sama as she embraced him.

"Gurgh?"

"Shinichi-sama!" I rushed over to him as well. "Are you hurt?! Are you all right?!"

It was really Shinichi-sama standing in front of me. I was happy to see him for the first time in so long. I was transcendently glad that he was safe. I felt like if I wasn't careful, I might break down crying right then and there.

"I'm not... hurt, but..." Shinichi-sama groaned. "I think I might... choke to death..."

"Elvia-san!"

"Oh! S-Sorry!" She quickly let him go. She was as happy as I was to be reunited with him, and caught up in the moment, had forgotten her own

strength.

"But why in the world are all of you here?" Shinichi-sama asked.

"To rescue you, of course!" Elvia-san said. "Big Sis Ama told us where you'd be!"

"'Big Sis Ama'?"

"She means Amatena-san," I clarified.

"*Amatena* told you?" he asked. "And that dragon—"

"Oh, Loek-sama and Romilda-sama—"

Elvia-san jumped up. "Details later! Run now! We have to—geh?!" She hadn't finished her sentence before something blew her sideways.

"Elvia!"

"Elvia-san?!"

We watched in shock as Elvia-san bounced once on the ground and rolled several times more. Whatever had struck her must have been very powerful.

It had to be some kind of—

"Magic!" Shinichi-sama shouted.

Yes: we could see several of the Bahairamanian soldiers peeking out from the shadows of the nearby building. The two closest to us each had a hand raised. I assumed they had used something like Tifu Murottsu on Elvia-san. Their uniforms looked subtly different from the other soldiers'; they were probably special forces trained in the use of magic, or perhaps they were a couple of the mages conducting research at this facility.

"Elvia, are you okay?"

"I—I'm fine!" Elvia-san bounced to her feet. "I'm nothing if not tough!" She jogged back toward us.

The mages, however, appeared to be chanting another spell. Not the same one, but something probably considerably more powerful. I saw fire sprites collecting in the outstretched palm of the man closest to us, gathering into a bright beam.

I couldn't imagine even Elvia-san standing up to a direct hit from something like that. For that matter, there was a good chance Shinichi-sama and I would be caught in the blast as well. And so...

"Huh? Hey—Myusel!"

"Elvia-san, take care of Shinichi-sama!"

"Got it!"

I saw Elvia-san grab Shinichi-sama up in her arms, while I took a step forward to cover them. Elvia-san might be carrying Shinichi-sama, but as for me, I was carrying the weapon Minori-sama had lent me.

In the space of a breath, the globe of fire sprites had become so bright it was hard to look at. There was no question the mage intended to burn us all alive.

It was terrifying. But all I could do was trust.

The mage released the beam of light. I didn't dodge out of the way, but instead ran headlong toward it.

Your Majesty!

The image of Petralka an Eldant III flashed through my mind. With my mouth, I was intoning a spell...

BOOM!

To either side of me, there was a deafening noise.

But as for me myself—

"What?!"

"A magic shield?"

"No, that was—"

The Bahairamanian soldiers were thoroughly confused.

I was wearing the battle dress Her Majesty had handed down to me. The dye was made from a rare ore which conducted magic readily; the cloak was woven of metal threads that incorporated the same ore, and the entire thing was made with magic-amplification spells that specialist mages had spent much time and effort developing.

This was magic that made magic many times more powerful.

Her Majesty had long borne anti-magic inscriptions on her honored body. Such charms of resistance would repel magical attacks up to a certain point, but they had their limits. A spell that exceeded the charms' ability to defend her would overcome them, just like an ordinary weapon could pierce through a shield if it were strong enough.

And on the battlefield, such powerful magicks were not uncommon. That was why Her Majesty had this "magic-amplifying magic" on her battle dress. When combined with the spells of resistance on her body, the cloak could withstand even the assaults of a magical siege weapon, let alone a

troop of individual soldiers.

I obviously had no such spells of resistance, so instead I chanted my usual Tifu Murottsu. The cloak, however, increased it to dozens of times its usual power, strong enough that when my spell collided with the beam of light, it caused an explosion and even deflected the attack to the side.

“Just chop her up already!” The soldiers seemed to have realized that magic wouldn’t stop me, so they drew their swords instead.

“Sirs,” I shouted, “if you don’t want to die, then move aside!”

To illustrate my point, I made use of the weapon Minori-sama had lent me.

The “Mini-mee Em Too For Nyne Squad Auto-matic Weapon.”

The steel tube nearly jumped out of my hands, golden metal cylinders flying from it along with a series of roars. The cylinders slammed into the ground around the feet of the Bahairamanian soldiers, leaving gouges in the dirt and kicking up hot, sharp rocks.

The soldiers almost stumbled as they came to a screeching halt.

The power of this Ja-panese weapon was astonishing. It was tremendously heavy, so much so that it had been challenging for me even to carry it with me, but now I saw how worthwhile that effort had been. All by myself, I had halted a group of a dozen Bahairamanian soldiers.

“It hurts to get hit with this!” I shouted. “It hurts very much! You’ll die!”

Clutching the Mini-mee, which was still spitting fire, I dashed forward. The soldiers were kind enough to be worried about this.

“Yikes!”

“Stay back!”

“Eeyyargh!”

The little flakes of fire had struck some of the soldiers in the leg. They screamed and bent double, but I ignored them and continued my advance.

I found that Elvia-san, still carrying Shinichi-sama, had jogged up beside me.

“Now’s our chance!” I shouted.

“Got it!”

We used the Mini-mee to keep the soldiers at bay, making our way to where the Faldra was defending itself with great sweeps of its tail and wings.

“Sensei!” Loek-sama and Romilda-sama were grinning from the back of the monster. “Are you all right, Sensei?”

“Loek?” Shinichi-sama said. “Romilda? You’re here, too? Hang on, this can’t possibly be the dragon we used for the—”

“Uh-huh!”

“We did a little work on it, so now it moves with magic!” Loek-sama and Romilda-sama looked very pleased with themselves.

Then they chorused: “‘It’s so crazy it just might work!’”

“What are you, the scientists on some space battleship?!” Shinichi-sama demanded. But he sounded genuinely moved as he muttered, “I guess I’ve rubbed off on you.”

“Enough quoting, everybody hop on!” Minori-sama shouted, running up to us. “Hurry! We can’t wait around until reinforcements get here!”

We scrambled onto the Faldra’s back.

At that moment, there came a roar unlike anything I had ever heard. We looked back and saw thick black smoke billowing from the ceiling of the largest building in the area, the one that stood on the edge of the premises.

“Wh-Whazzat?!” Elvia-san exclaimed. “*What is that?!*”

“That’s...” Shinichi-sama’s face was tight, as if he already knew something about that building. “...a dragon!”

Something blew the roof of the building clean off. Then we saw it. It was, indeed, a dragon.

It was huge, dozens of times bigger than any wyvern, two or three times the size of even our Faldra. It ascended into the air with lazy flaps of its wings. And in its forehead was—

“Puppet drake!”

Minori-sama was right: one of the “spikes” used to make puppets was pounded into its head.

This thing was a weapon. Bahairam’s weapon.

How could we have been so oblivious? If this was a research facility dedicated to puppet magic and technology, then of course there could be a puppet drake here. Although granted, given our understanding that the puppet drake was still a work in progress, there was no reason we should have expected to suddenly have to face one in combat.

GRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!

The monster opened its jaws and let out a resounding roar. Its cloudy eyes searched this way and that—and then a second later, it was flying toward us.

"Skyward! Double-time!"

"On it!"

At Minori-sama's urging, Loek-sama, Romilda-sama, and I started using our magic to make the Faldra fly. Wind sprites swirled beneath its outstretched wings, lifting its huge body into the air.

But then Elvia-san shouted, "Look out!"

The puppet drake opened its jaws, fire sprites gathering in its mouth. It looked a lot like the spell the mage had used earlier—only much, much bigger.

"Fire breath...!"

"Dodge! Circle right!" Minori-sama shouted. The Faldra wheeled around to the right. I was desperately clutching at the handholds on its back when—

BLAM!

The dragon's fire breath flew through the air, scorching the Faldra's side. The attack flew past us, landing in a field with a tremendous explosion and a flash. The blast was so powerful we could feel the shockwave even at this distance. If it had hit us head-on, we probably wouldn't even have left corpses for them to recover.

Things were only marginally better now: the Faldra had dodged the attack, not escaped unscathed. The glancing blow from the fire breath had caused patches of the mech's leather skin to burst into flame.

"That's hot!" Elvia-san shouted.

“There’s fire there! And there! And there!” Shinichi-sama babbled, pointing to one place and another. At this rate the flames would soon consume us as well. With the Faldra itself literally going up in smoke, an airborne escape was looking less and less likely.

But then Loek-sama suddenly shouted to Romilda-sama, “Romilda, scuttle the exterior covering!”

“Right!” Romilda-sama shouted back, and suddenly the “skin” fell off the Faldra as if it were shrugging off a set of clothes.

“Whoa!” Shinichi-sama exclaimed. It was certainly a startling sight. Without the leather, the Faldra looked altogether different. It appeared less like a dragon and more like a suit of armor in the shape of a dragon. The Faldra was formed of overlapping layers of metal, which scraped over each other to produce the creature’s unique sound. It looked very tough and brought to mind a dragon’s skeleton.

What was more, a green light glowed from between the plates. There was probably a magic gem or something buried deep inside the Faldra to enable it to move. Broadly speaking, it might be something similar to the ore used in my battle dress. The glow indelibly marked out the Faldra as something other than a living being.

With the Faldra revealed in this way, there was a lot of shouting:

“Whoa! Whoa, whoa! That is *awesome*!”

“Isn’t it? Isn’t it just great?”

“We’re so glad you understand us, Sensei!”

Specifically, shouting between Shinichi-sama, Loek-sama, and Romilda-sama.

“I sure wish you could’ve had this set up in time for our movie!”

“That’s what sequels are for, Sensei!”

“Can we save the box office chatter for *after* we get home alive?!” Minori-sama bellowed.

“Here it comes!”

“Yikes!”

Having missed us with its fire breath, the puppet drake was now rocketing through the air in our direction, as if to deliver a body slam. Loek-sama and I directed the wind we were controlling so that the Faldra lurched upward and avoided it. The puppet drake’s claws grazed the Faldra’s wings, sparking and screeching as they dragged along. But then the

creature was past us.

“Oh crap! Down! We’re going down!”

“Stay calm, Sensei!” Loek-sama instructed. However...

“Erk!”

“Eek!”

Loek-sama and Romilda-sama both cried out almost simultaneously. With a jerk, we stopped moving. When we look back, we saw that the puppet drake had the Faldra’s long tail in its mouth. It must have grabbed hold as it went by us.

The puppet drake twisted in midair, dragging the Faldra along.

“Gaaahhhh!” All of us let up a cry. Our mount flew toward the earth like a hammer...

“You think you can get away with that?!” Loek-sama and Romilda-sama cried in unison. A tremendous blast of wind caught the Faldra, but even that wasn’t enough to stop its momentum; its front legs dug into the ground.

I was used to seeing Loek-sama and Romilda-sama fight all the time, but somehow they were in perfect harmony at this moment.

“You let us go!” Minori-sama cried. I had given the Mini-mee back to her, and she used it now to spit little shards of fire. They impacted against the puppet drake’s face and the spike in its head, and it backed away with an earsplitting shriek. Thankfully, that meant letting the Faldra go.

“I—I thought we were done for,” said Elvia-san, pale. She was the only one of us not strapped in on the Faldra’s back, so there had been a real danger of her being thrown off.

“Looks like escape isn’t going to be that easy,” Minori-sama said.

Clearly. That puppet drake could probably run us down if we tried to take to the sky, not least because our dragon was weighed down with six separate people. Even if the two monsters had basically the same airspeed, ours would be at a disadvantage.

If we couldn’t run, that meant we would have to fight. But our opponent was impervious to magic, which left us effectively powerless—or so I thought.

“Minori-sensei!” Loek-sama said. “Leave this to us!”

“Huh?”

Minori-sama was more than a bit flummoxed by this request. But even as she sat blinking, Loek-sama and Romilda-sama nodded at each other,

then shouted together:

"*Ultimate Transformation!!*"

"*Ultimate Transformation!!*" Loek and Romilda shouted, their voices almost in harmony. "*GO! Faldra—standing mode!*"

"Whaaaaat?!" I found myself shouting.

Transformation? As in, change? As in variable, modular, multiform—

And when you say *transformation*, that can only mean...

"Wh-What?! What's going on?! Minori-san looked as surprised as I was; apparently this ability was new to her, too. More to the point, was this stuff even possible with magic, no matter how strong you were? Way to go, Loek and Romilda!

The green glow coming from inside the dragon-like thing—the Faldra, as they called it—began to get stronger. In the blink of an eye it had encompassed us and continued to expand, forming something. The armor plates separated and began sliding around, some of them turning backwards or spinning in place. The dragon disappeared, and in the green light of that magic the Faldra took on a new shape.

With us still on board.

"Whaaa?!"

This was one crazy transformation! Wouldn't this be pretty hard to do with the toy? But then again, maybe Ban**i's prodigious transformer-toy technology could manage it?!

"Wait...!"

For some reason, *I* was in the driver's seat.

Wh-What was I talking about? What had been done to me? I felt like I was going crazy... It sure wasn't anything as simple as hypnosis or high-speed; it... (blah blah blah).

Seriously, this happened so suddenly that I thought I was going to go into some Sta*d-user-esque monologue, complete with elaborate ASCII art.

"What in the world...?"

Even as I asked, though, I had a certain idea. We had just gone from flying on the back of this thing to riding in the middle of it.

True, having the pilot sit right out in the open air pretty much screamed "Here's my weak point," so a transformation only made sense. Plus, because everything that had been tucked inside the dragon was now on the outside as armor, the Faldra was considerably larger than it had been while flying. That was why all of us were able to fit comfortably inside.

Okay, with six people, *comfortably* might have been a stretch. A glowing green stone was positioned directly above my head where I sat in the pilot's seat, and it was a little claustrophobic.

"Woo-hoo!"

"It worked!"

Loek and Romilda were both overjoyed. As for Myusel, Elvia, and Minori-san, they just looked relieved.

Which was reasonable, I guess.

Incidentally, just in front of us was something like a screen, a half-sphere perhaps also made possible with magic, on which was displayed the view outside. There were some small crystal-like things near my hands, on which were what appeared to be the figure of the Faldra's "standing mode."

I guess you could say it looked pretty good. It was a humanoid figure covered in dark, steel-colored armor. There must have been more than one magic stone, because in addition to the big main one in the chest, a green glow came from the shoulders and hips as well.

Although they referred to this as the "standing mode," the Faldra didn't exactly stand the way a normal human would. Instead, its legs came to pointy tips that seemed to dig into the earth. But that also gave it an impression of lightness, like a blade held at the ready.

Wow. Cool...!

Gun**m and the tradition of "realistic robots" it inspired were all well and good, but I could definitely get *moe* for the sort of all-together-now, power-of-friendship combo robot that everyone piloted together. I would definitely have to make sure everyone struck a pose when we did our special move!

I was just basking in the excitement of all this when Minori-san shouted, "The drake! Where's the puppet drake?!"

Oops. I forgot.

It seemed like Loek and the others had too, because there was a lot of "Huh?" and "Oh" and "Hmm..."

We moved the screen in front of us, searching for it.

Then Minori-san shouted again: “To the right!”

Romilda brought up the Faldra’s right arm, which also moved its vision to that side. And there was the puppet drake, smack in the middle of charging right at us.

“Hwah?!”

There was a *clang* as it hit us. The shock threw the cockpit into disarray. Elvia and Myusel tumbled on top of me, and scandalously, there I was with someone’s soft boobs and someone else’s soft butt right in my face, in my face, in ahhhh

“Here it comes again!” Minori-san said, bracing herself against the walls and floor of the cockpit. Each of us tensed against the inevitable impact—but then...

“Yah!” Romilda exclaimed, and the puppet drake slid underneath us.

No—she had caused the Faldra to jump and avoid it.

“Can we just clarify who’s controlling this thing and how?!”

Squad-robot pictures usually involved everyone striking poses while they fought. (Not that there was any reason that should have made a humanoid fighting weapon move.)

“It basically works like a clay doll,” Romilda said.

Clay doll? Was that—you know? The exo-skeleton-like things the dwarves had conjured up during the soccer tournament? That made sense: the dwarves were masters at working with the earth, or more generally with inanimate objects, so it was only logical that the Faldra with all its armor would operate on a similar principle.

Though if you wanted to know what exactly that principle was, I couldn’t begin to tell you.

“So it moves where I tell it to!” Romilda concluded.

“And it flies where *I* tell it to!” Loek piped in.

“How is flying relevant right now?!”

“What do you mean? The Faldra can only stand on two legs like this because it’s supported by wind sprites...”

Ah, so even though the Faldra was walking around on two legs, it was wind magic that supported it whenever it seemed like it might fall over. That’s why it could respond with such astonishing lightness to Romilda’s intentions.

“Everyone hold on tight!” Romilda shouted, and then the Faldra ran forward. Of course, as Loek had explained, it was supported by wind magic as it went, so it looked as much like it was floating as running.

“Throw a punch, Romilda!”

“Right!”

Loek and Romilda piloted the Faldra in perfect harmony, without a trace of their usual acrimony. The Faldra’s fist glowed a magical green for an instant, then flew toward the puppet drake. You’d think those joints would be really fragile, but maybe that was a defensive spell I’d seen, because they slammed into the puppet drake’s face with an audible crash but no sign of breaking.

Rooooooaaaarrrr!!

The puppet drake rose up slightly and howled, whether from pain or anger I wasn't sure.

"Launch a kick, Romilda!"

"Right!"

As Romilda shouted enthusiastically, the Faldra rotated its blade-like leg, throwing a kick diagonally at the puppet drake's head. As I expected by now, there was a magic gem in the Faldra's hip, or kind of in its shin, which glowed green, ensconcing the entire body in that defensive magic.

This *boom!* was even louder than the punch. Several of the dragon's scales shattered, and we could see startled sprites letting off sparks and lightning bolts around it.

Awesome! This Faldra was so strong!

Or was it Romilda who was so powerful? Hmm.

At the moment, though, it was an academic question.

Rooooaaarrrrrrrr!!

This time the puppet drake was even noisier. It made a half-turn, then lashed out with its long tail as if it were a whip.

"Anti-impact defense!" Minori-san cried out.

"Got it!" Myusel responded.

Almost simultaneously, a whirlwind enveloped the Faldra's left arm. It was an instantaneously-created layer of pressurized air that acted like a shield, deflecting the dragon's tail and neutralizing its power.

The dragon next tried to take a bite out of the Faldra, then scratch at it with its claws, but we deflected or dodged each attack.

At the same time, though, despite how loud and impressive they were, several of the Faldra's attacks didn't seem to have slowed down the puppet drake. Was this just because our opponent was reptilian and didn't feel much pain? Was it really that tough? Or did *being* a puppet mean it didn't feel pain and fatigue?

But that suggested...

"Aim for the spike!" I yelled.

That was pretty obviously its weak point. In fact, I kind of wished

Bahairam's mages had thought a little harder, you know? If they had succeeded in turning me into a puppet, I would have just kept running into everything, and then eventually... (shiver).

"Got it!" Romilda said, a kick from the Faldra slamming into the puppet drake's forehead. It hit the spike square on.

Roooooooaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrr!

The drake shook its head violently and backed off.

Awesome! It was working!

"This is our chance!" Loek said. "Finish it! Use the special move—Drill Hand!"

"Sure thing!"

The Faldra's hand pulled way back, its fingers joining to form a point, which started spinning very much like a drill bit.

Yeah. These kids know how it's done.

A drill! And a spear hand, at that!

Now *that's* a special move!

You've made your sensei so happy, kids! You've learned his lessons so well!

But while I was busy being moved by how much Loek and Romilda had grown as otaku...

"H-Huh...?"

...Romilda was not sounding very triumphant.

The Faldra's right hand suddenly slowed and then stopped rotating altogether. In fact, the mech's movements all seemed to be growing sluggish.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than the puppet drake's tail hit us.

Booooooonggg!!

"Eeeek!" The girls gave a collective scream when we got hit. Even the wall of wind that was supposed to defend against attacks like that didn't seem to be working. What in the world was going on?!

"It's not... moving like it's supposed to..."

“Huh...?” Loek and Romilda exchanged dark looks.

And then I put the pieces together.

The magic gems in the Faldra’s chest, legs, and shoulders. The vein-like pattern that ran along its armor. The green glow that suffused all of it was obviously getting weaker, flickering like a fluorescent lamp at the end of its life.

“But why?!” Loek shouted.

The Faldra was clearly running out of gas, but... Wait. Gas?

“The dragon’s energy drain!” I exclaimed.

Dragons—especially the huge creatures properly known as True Drakes—were immune to magic. Because they used sprites themselves to support their huge bodies, breathe fire, and even fly, they had bodily organs that allowed them to metabolize magic and sprite power. So when unstable magical power like that from a human got anywhere near a dragon, it was simply absorbed.

We had completely forgotten about that as we engaged with the puppet drake.

When the magic was simply latent inside the gem, that was one thing, but because we were constantly using magical power to control the Faldra, that power was always coursing over the vehicle’s surface. We needed even more magic to kick or punch, or to stop an opponent’s attack. Fighting the dragon in that state was as good as begging it to absorb our energy...

The premise was sound: you couldn’t fight a dragon with magic, so you would have to do it hand to hand. Powering your hand-to-hand fighter with magic defeated the point.

“Ahhhh, Romilda, you idiot!”

“You’re the idiot, Loek!”

Gosh. And they had been getting along so well.

And frankly, they were probably both idiots.

“Eeek!”

“Ahhhh!”

More blows assaulted the Faldra.

Crap. We’ll never hold up to this.

But without even the power to move an arm, let alone a leg, running away wasn’t looking very likely...

“Th-That’s it!” Romilda exclaimed suddenly. “We can use the

emergency power supply!”

“Huh? Do we have one of those?” I asked.

“Yes!” she nodded, then gave the magical gem above our heads a very solid smack.

“Yipes!”

The crystal had already nearly gone dim; now it cracked down the middle, and I saw something emerge from within. Wait, so that thing wasn’t solid?

What came out was...

“A... wheel?”

It looked like something a hamster would run on, but about ten times bigger. About human-size, actually.

“This thing was originally built as a marionette, remember?” Romilda said. “It has some gears to help it do things that strings alone couldn’t manage.”

“Wasn’t that for when it was flying?!”

“The mechanism is still there! Our range of movement will be limited, but if we turn this wheel, we should at least be able to walk—and it won’t use magic!”

“W-Will that really work?” Would the Faldra really move if we turned this wheel? I mean in this armored configuration, and with six passengers?

Talk about your hostile working conditions...

And all this was to say nothing of the fact that the wheel only looked big enough for one person...

“Elvia!” I said suddenly, turning to the werewolf girl and grabbing her by the shoulders.

“Y-Yes?” she said, startled.

“We need your strength!”

“Wh-Who, me? Mine?”

“Only you can do this!”

“Only I can—?” Her eyes got bigger.

I understand that forcing a young woman to do this kind of physical labor is a questionable proposition, but all our lives were on the line here; this was no time to be getting caught up in notions of chivalry. Elvia, as a werewolf, was far and away the strongest of any of us.

“We need you!”

“But I...”

Hey, why are your cheeks getting so red?

No! Not the time to be wondering about that!

“Run, Elvia! Run for our future!”

“Uh... Okay? Whatever you say!” She nodded and jumped on the wheel. Then she started to run.

“Whoaaaa!”

Fzzzzzz! The wheel spun with a very familiar sound, the Faldra creaking in time along with it. Meanwhile, Romilda had taken hold of a collection of exposed pegs, a smile on her face. Apparently, those pegs were what would let her control the Faldra by hand.

“It’s working!” Although with much less fluidity than before, the Faldra had started to move. “We can do this, Sensei!”

“Great! L-Let’s start by getting some distance.”

“Sounds good,” Romilda said, nodding. Our ride began, totteringly but unmistakably, to put some space between itself and the puppet drake.

Our enemy was holding station up in the air. Maybe it thought it could use its fire breath again.

“Hrrraaaaahhhhh!” Elvia bellowed as she ran and ran and ran. She was already covered in sweat, her breath coming in ragged gasps, but somehow she kept going faster and faster. I had never seen anyone work so hard. It was incredible. Thanks to her, the Faldra was able to walk without falling over.

But even so...

“This is bad...!”

We still couldn’t jump or fly. Those actions were obviously enabled by magic. Worse, our gems seemed to still be recovering; the green glow wasn’t quite back at full strength. And there was no way we could move the entire Faldra using just our personal magic...

In this state, we wouldn’t be dodging any fire breath.

I thought I saw despair peeking over the horizon of panic.

Is there something we can do? Anything! Anything at all!

Myusel, Minori-san, Elvia, Loek and Romilda—they had all come specifically to rescue me! And now they were going to be slaughtered for their troubles...

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Minori-san look up

resolutely. Did she mean to take on the dragon in bare-handed combat like she had before?!

No, Minori-san! It just isn't possible!

"Looks like there's no choice. Romilda, open up the cockpit!"

"Wha? But Minori-sensei, that's—"

"Open it! That's an order!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

Romilda flipped something, and the armor that had been protecting the cockpit suddenly opened, connecting us directly to the outside world. Now I could see the glowing globe forming in the dragon's jaws with my own eyes. *Crap! We're all—*

"Everyone, get down!" Minori-san shouted, then grabbed something in the cockpit and jumped out of the Faldra.

"Hey—Minori-san?!"

"Sensei!"

Romilda quickly directed the Faldra to bring its hand down to Minori-san. She jumped on its open palm, then I heard her yell:

"*So-Crazy-It-Just-Might-Work Finishing Move!!*" She sounded so loud. So proud. "*Panzerfaust Drei*!!"

W-Wait just a second...!

Before I could even get a smart remark out of my mouth, Minori-san had braced the object against her shoulder—it was a rocket-boosted recoilless weapon—and fired.

The exhaust gasses came flying out the back.

"Waaahothothot!"

They obviously didn't come directly at us, but the gout of smoke and flame from the shot built up against the cockpit armor, immediately and dramatically driving up the temperature.

As for the 110-millimeter personal anti-tank shell, it went flying off, trailing white smoke.

It was headed straight for the dragon, which probably couldn't even see the rocket in the glare from the magical globe in its own mouth. The projectile scored a direct hit.

The sound of the ensuing explosion filled the area. Half the puppet drake was obscured by a cloud of white smoke.

We took in a collective breath: when the smoke cleared, we saw that the

dragon's head had been blown clean off.

"Yikes..."

Even from this distance, it wasn't a pleasant sight. But at the same time, it meant the dragon had been neutralized...!

"M-Minori-san..."

"Heh heh!" Minori-san chuckled as she climbed back into the cockpit. "Crazy like a fox. I'm glad I brought this puppy along."

"That thing's not exactly a travel necessity! Are you a lab coat-wearing nutzoid scientist, too?!" *There's a line to draw when you're packing for a trip!* "And what do you mean 'puppy,' anyway?! You could at least call it a 110-millimeter personal anti-tank weapon or a LAM or something!"

"But can't you just imagine it being glossed *Finishing Move* in a manga?"

Well, yes, I could, but...

"Anyway, thank God it only took one shot." *Since*, Minori-san added, *I only brought one with me.*

In point of fact, except for the sight and grip, a Panzerfaust 3 is entirely disposable.

"Wait a second," I said. "If you had something like that along, why didn't you use it in the first place?!"

"It's surprisingly hard to just, y'know, *use*," she said. "You have to be careful of what's behind you."

"You weren't!"

"Plus, if you're too close, you get hurt, but if you're not close enough, you won't hit anything. Normally you at least get to brace yourself against the ground when you're using it." Minori-san shrugged.

If nothing else, she was right that you didn't normally fire one from atop a giant robot.

"Not to mention, I wanted to keep Bahairam from learning about that technology if I could."

"Ah..."

Now that she mentioned it, that made sense. We didn't know how much the Kingdom of Bahairam actually knew about Japan, but based on what Amatena had said, we at least knew that they entertained the possibility of conquering it if they got the chance.

That meant this kingdom was a potential enemy. The less they knew

about our weapons and technology—even if ours were vastly superior—the better. Personal weapons like the Type 89, the Minimi, or the M9 were one thing, but anti-tank munitions would definitely be something of a military secret vis-à-vis a country like Bahairam.

"And then there's the fact that unlike a handgun or small arms," Minori-san said, her eyes growing distant, "when you use one of those things, the paperwork is a huge headache."

"Don't tell me that's the real reason you wanted to avoid it."

".....Okay. I won't tell you."

She was pointedly not looking at me.

"Can you look me in the eye and say that, PFC Koganuma Minori?"

"The point is, Shinichi-kun, we have to get out of here!"

What a bold change of subject.

I looked around. Maybe it was because the puppet drake was dead, or maybe our magic regeneration had finally caught up with us, but in any event, the Faldra's crystal was glowing at full strength again.

"After that sort of noise, Bahairamanian reinforcements are sure to be on the way!" Minori-san said.

"Right!" Loek and Romilda nodded, and then the Faldra's armor started shifting again, returning us to the flight mode that would get us into the sky and out of Dodge.

We kept flying, straight out of the eastern city of Borfoi.

The only catch was, the Faldra was sounding kind of creaky, maybe on account of having just done hand-to-hand combat with a dragon, and we weren't sure it was fit for a long-distance flight.

So we were just looking for a place to set down and do some simple repairs on the mech when...

"Huh...?"

I looked out across a wasteland of sand and rocks, toward the mountains that formed the border with Eldant. Smack in the middle of it stood two figures.

Were those...?

"Sorry, Minori-san, but can I borrow your binoculars?"

"Sure, here." She handed me a pair of folding binoculars. I held them up and set the magnification.

"Hey..."

It was just what I had sort of almost expected. In fact, it was exactly what I had expected: Amatena and Clara. And for some reason, Amatena wasn't wearing her usual military uniform, but a traditional outfit much like Clara's. A lot like Elvia's, for that matter. It showed a lot of skin (or fur), and yeah, I have to admit, it definitely turned me on... But even ignoring the part of my mind that was in the gutter, I personally thought the outfit looked really good on her.

"Stop here!" I cried. "Er, I mean, put 'er down!"

There was a collective "Wha?"

"You see those people there? I want you to set down there for a moment."

"Wait. Isn't that—"

I might have guessed Elvia would have good eyes. She didn't seem sure about this.

"Shinichi-sama, that's...!"

"It's okay, trust me," I said, my tone admitting little argument.

There was no sign of other Bahairamanian soldiers in the immediate area, and neither Amatena nor Clara was dressed for battle. Finally, at a nod from Minori-san, Loek and Romilda brought the Faldra down to land next to the two beast girls.

I immediately jumped off the fake dragon. Minori-san, ever my bodyguard, was right behind me with her M9 at the ready, but everyone else stayed on the Faldra. Even Elvia didn't make any move to dismount. In fact, she perched watching Amatena and Clara like a wary animal.

"I had a feeling it might come to this," Amatena said with a sigh as Minori-san and I approached. It didn't seem like word had reached the army yet of my escape. Well, we had flown straight here after busting out of the research facility. If anything, it suggested that Amatena had known this might happen.

"Thanks," I said earnestly.

It was because of Amatena that Minori-san and the others had known where I was. Her position in the military had prevented her from personally helping me escape, but without the hint she gave Minori-san, I would probably still be on my way to get spiked.

"I hear this is all thanks to you," I said.

"Me? I didn't do anything," she said expressionlessly. "If anything I did

happened to benefit you pieces of filth, I certainly didn't do it for that purpose."

"Sure, I know," I said, smiling at this display of tsundere-ishness.

"I believed that someone like you was absolutely necessary to the future of this country."

I didn't have anything to say to that. In its quest for power, the Kingdom of Bahairam was starting to treat people like mass-produced consumables (even if this world, not yet having experienced an industrial revolution, probably didn't have that concept). A rich traditional culture had been thrown away wholesale, replaced with attempts to control the populace and a philosophical fixation on a strong army.

And maybe, just maybe, that didn't sit right with Amatena.

Or maybe the other citizens of this country, either. Maybe that was exactly why the king and his advisors thought it was so important to reinforce the people's loyalty. They could probably sense the discontent spreading.

"Elvia is... different now," Amatena said suddenly.

"Huh?" The voice came from the back of the Faldra—from Elvia.

Maybe she hadn't realized it herself. Honestly, I hadn't known Elvia long enough to be sure either way.

Something tugged at Amatena's lips; she looked perilously close to a smile. A wry smile, maybe.

"She would never have stood against me like that before. She would have quietly run away. I suppose it's meeting you that has wrought this change in her."

I was hardly in a position to be all, "Oh yeah, obviously. You should be grateful." I hadn't even thought of myself as having enough influence with Elvia to cause her to act differently. Literally all I did was to have her stay at the mansion drawing pictures.

"For all the beating and shouting we gave her, we were unable to change Elvia. Not us her sisters, not her parents. Perhaps it only shows that such things lack the power to change people."

I didn't say anything.

"All the more reason why revolutionaries like you are crucial for this country. So I simply... I would have hated to see you used up as nothing more than a test subject for puppet technology. That's all there is to it. And

with you escaping, my efforts have come to little."

"Revolutionary, huh...?"

Amatena really was worried about the future of her country. But given her particular position and talents, there was nothing she could do about it alone.

So instead, she looked for someone like me to kidnap under the guise of strengthening control over the population, in hopes that I might bring even the slightest bit of new thinking to the country... Or was that just my overactive imagination?

"Amatena," I said.

"Yes. What?"

"If instead of ordering me to create something that would cause the people to be more loyal to the king, you had asked me to think of something that everyone could enjoy together... I would gladly have helped."

This time it was her turn to be silent, but she shook her head. Did she mean she wouldn't have done that? Or that what-ifs weren't worth talking about? Or maybe something else? I simply didn't know.

Then Amatena said, "You should go now. If you stay here for very long, the pursuit squadron will catch up with you."

That wouldn't be any better for her than it would be for us. After all, Amatena had deliberately let Myusel and the others know where I was and when I would be there, and at the same time had failed to inform the research facility that my rescuers knew... And now here she was, practically seeing us off. The government would certainly consider her to be lending aid and comfort to the enemy.

Even if what she was really doing was trying to help Bahairam.

"You're right. We're on our way. But... really, thank you."

Amatena stayed quiet, but she shrugged.

"And... Clara."

"Yes...?" she asked in surprise. Maybe she had expected me to just ignore her at this point. But instead I said...

"Do you want to come with us?"

"What...?" This time Amatena looked as surprised as Clara. "Why? Why me?"

"No special reason," I said evasively. After all, Amatena was standing right there.

I didn’t know how serious she had been, but Amatena had once threatened to kill Clara if I didn’t do what she said. It seemed clear that despite the way this society trumpeted equality of all its citizens, there was a pretty clear-cut system of status, and Clara was probably not very high on the ladder.

Amatena had enough station in this country that she could take care of herself, but I thought maybe it would be better for Clara if she came with us.

The girl was silent for a moment, thinking about it. Then she said, “Thank you very much,” and gave me the first smile I’d ever seen from her.

Whoa! Cuteness alert!

“But I’m not coming,” she said. “I’m going to stay with my sister.”

“That so?” I had sort of thought she might say that, so I wasn’t really shocked.

I nodded to Clara and then to Amatena. “We’ll be on our way, then. You both take care of yourselves.”

I turned around and was about to walk away.

“Shinichi-sama.”

I felt a tug on my arm.

It was Clara.

She was surprisingly strong.

“Uh... Wha—?”

I had turned halfway back toward her when...

Smooch.

I felt something warm and soft on my cheek.

“!#$%&~□?!”

My gray matter lit up in absolute astonishment.

A second later, she was sliding away from me.

“C—Clara?!”

Was this—could it be—uh—you know—that thing?! That, uh, the—!!

“You told me once that this is what you do to someone you care about, right?”

“Er, I mean, yeah, but...”

“Though you’re still second to my big sister.”

Clara’s mission to ensnare me was supposed to be over. So did that mean she was doing this freely...?

I might be second to Amatena, but didn’t that mean I was number one on her list of boys?!

Whoaaaaaaaa!!

*WAS THAT **REALLY** A GIRL’S FIRST CONFESSION OF LOVE FOR ME?!*

My internal monologue was going nuts, but Amatena sounded characteristically unimpressed.

“You should get going, and soon. Everyone’s waiting for you.”

“Y-Yeah, sure.”

Still feeling shaken and stirred, I obediently headed back to the Faldra. Jogging alongside me, Minori-san looked at me with her eyes half-closed behind her glasses.

“Gosh, Shinichi-kun. We put our lives on the line to rescue you, and it turns out you’ve already got yourself a little wife here?”

“Huh? No, we’re not—”

“And so young!

“I told you, she isn’t—”

“What will Her Majesty think?!” Minori-san was practically chortling as we jumped aboard the Faldra.

“No! You can’t—”

“Shinichi-sama...” Now Myusel was looking at me with brimming eyes. “Is it... Is it possible we’ve...” She could hardly bring herself to look at me. “Have we done the wrong thing by rescuing you?”

“Don’t take this so seriously, Myusel!” I said, starting to sound a little desperate. “You *do* know I was about to have a spike pounded into my brain, don’t you?!”

“Time for liftoff!”

Thankfully, Loek interrupted us with a change of subject. Myusel, still

not looking very sure, started chanting a spell that put wind under the Faldra's wings and started lifting us into the air.

"Big Sis Ama!" Elvia called from the mech's back.

Amatena squinted up at us. Despite impulsively calling to her sister, Elvia didn't quite seem to know how to follow up. "Um... Uh..." she said, looking at her sister with a pained expression.

Instead it was Amatena who spoke. "Show your face around here sometimes," she said. "Big Sister Jiji will want to see you. And Father and Mother, too."

"Uh..." Elvia looked shocked for a moment, but then she said, "I will!" and waved to her sister, a huge grin on her face and her tail wagging wildly.

At last the Faldra got some altitude, took one big turn, and picked up speed.

Amatena and Clara grew smaller and smaller in the distance, but Elvia kept craning her neck farther, always looking in their direction.

"Right," Minori-san said with a bit of a sigh. "Now we can finally go home to Eldant."

"Yeah," I agreed. It was funny: I had been dragged here basically against my will, but now I didn't really feel homesick for Japan. It was Eldant I was eager to get back to—even though I had only been away for about two weeks.

Why? It had to be because of all the people who were there.

People like Myusel. Minori-san. Petralka. Elvia. Brooke. Cerise. Everyone at the school...

For me, it really was "going home."

I pointed to the blue sky and shouted, "Destination: Eldant. Full speed ahead!"

"Right!" Loek and Romilda nodded in unison, and the Faldra accelerated even more.

And with the sudden rush of air across its back..... I nearly fell off.

Epilogue: Cultural Invasion Redux

Actually arriving home presented its own challenges.

They started at the mansion that served as Amutech's headquarters. Brooke and Cerise met me at the door.

"Good t' see y' again, Master."

The two lizardmen looked exactly the same as always, which immediately gave me a comforting feeling of *ahh, I'm back*..... Kind of.

"Uh... Brooke?"

"Yessir."

"What's with the sword?" I asked, looking at the blade in his left hand. It was still in its sheathe, but from the workmanship, it was obviously a real weapon. The kind of undistinguished item a soldier might be issued to carry into battle.

Yes, I was aware Brooke had once been a famous hero, but when I thought about it, I realized I had never seen him with a weapon.

"Aherm."

He gave the sword to Cerise, then knelt in front of me, like a condemned criminal awaiting judgment.

"It was m' own inattention that allowed those villains to get close enough to this mansion to capture you, sir."

"...Huh?"

"You'd be within your rights to have my head, Master. But I've a wife now, and t'aint just my own life anymore. I beg of you to show mercy and take only an arm or leg, or maybe—"

"I don't need to take anything!" I cried. What was he, a member of the yakuza? Heck, even they usually settled for just a finger! Anyway, cutting off Brooke's appendages wasn't going to make me happy! It wouldn't do anything for me!

"Just forget about it!" I insisted.

"Y' mean you'll be merciful to me?"

"Yes! Merciful! Magnanimous, forgiving, whatever you want! Cerise,

don’t raise that sword like that! You’re scaring me!” While I had been talking (?) with Brooke, Cerise had raised the sword above her head like she was about to help Brooke commit ritual suicide.

“Brooke, you’re not even officially my bodyguard!”

“That is true,” the lizardman said, looking up. “Do you mean y’ intend to cut off Minori-sama’s arm instead?”

“No, I don’t!” I shouted, holding my head. Intercultural communication could be real tricky sometimes...

As this commotion was going on in front of the house, a contingent of knights and a carriage from Eldant Castle arrived for us. Maybe Loek and Romilda, who had left earlier, had told them we were back. In any event, we were pretty much forced to make an immediate appearance at the castle.

“Shinichi!” A familiar voice greeted me the moment I walked into the audience chamber.

It was Petralka. The loli(-looking) empress was, as always, seated on a huge throne that dwarfed her small body.

“It is you, isn’t it?! You aren’t hurt?!”

“Your Majesty...”

She had almost jumped to her feet when I came in, but slowly sat back down at the urging of Garius, her knight and trusted confidant. *She’s so cute.* And it made me happy to realize she had been worried about me, too.

But I’m definitely not the empress’s lover, okay?

I decided to keep the thought to myself.

Petralka coughed once, then shifted to face me and Minori-san again.

"We welcome you back, Shinichi," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And Minori, you've done well to bring him home."

"It was my pleasure, Your Majesty. But I wasn't the only one," Minori-san said with a soft smile. "Myusel, Elvia, and Loek and Romilda were all crucial. Those last two in particular—I know you might wish to reprimand them, but please remember that they're both young, and be merciful."

"We understand," Petralka said, smiling drily. She nodded at her advisors, who were lined up in attendance around the audience chamber. I could make out an elf and a dwarf among them, probably Loek's and Romilda's dads.

"Although they acted on their own accord, as a result of their adventure one of Bahairam's puppet drake research centers has been effectively destroyed. They're heroes, although they must be so secretly."

The elf and dwarf councilors both nodded appreciatively at this.

"Shinichi. Everyone was worried about you."

"I'm glad to know that, really," I said. My time as a private security guard had given me an appreciation of how special it was to have someone who wasn't even a blood relation be concerned about you.

"We believe a feast celebrating your safe return is in order!" Petralka said. She was in high spirits.

"Oh, no, you don't have to... I mean, I'm sorry, but I'd really like to rest a little. To be honest, I'm exhausted."

"Hmm. And well you might be. Very well, we shall postpone the feast to another time."

So apparently there was no getting out of the feast itself. Not that I really minded...

"If instead there should be any token of appreciation that you wish, you need only say it. Food or drink or anything."

"Thanks," I said, but it just felt like a social nicety.

After a moment, something occurred to me. "Say, Petralka?"

"What is it?"

"There is one thing I'd like to ask for."

"Hm?"

She leaned forward, her eyes sparkling; Garius and Prime Minister

Zahar, who was also standing by the throne, exchanged a look. They knew from experience that I must be planning something.

"Well, not so much ask... Consider it a suggestion."

Amatena's words came back to me:

"I believed that someone like you was absolutely necessary to the future of this country."

"For all the beating and shouting we gave her, we were unable to change Elvia. Not us her sisters, not her parents. Perhaps it only shows that such things lack the power to change people."

Amatena had wanted to change Bahairam. Not by revolution or open rebellion or anything violent like that. She was, in her own way, afraid for her nation's future. Not so much about the imposition of worldview, the trimming away of luxuries, or even the totalitarian rule—she saw Bahairam heading down a collectivist path that she didn't like.

And what about me? Was there anything I could do? Some small act of resistance I could contribute to a culture and worldview in danger of becoming closed off?

"I recommend a cultural invasion of Bahairam."

That sent a real shock through the audience chamber.

A month had passed since Shinichi had returned to the Eldant Empire.

I had finished work and was just arriving home when I saw something exceedingly unusual: a package addressed to me. And one not sent through channels, at that.

Most likely it had been passed from hand to hand. The wooden box was filthy, and the sender had not included their name. Frankly, I was impressed it had reached me at all. Written across the top was "A curse be upon whoever breaks this seal without permission," but this was mostly a conceit. Very few people actually bothered to curse their mail. Although there was no shortage of lowlifes who might try to open other people's letters and

packages.

I opened the box and looked inside. It appeared to be full of books, a whole pile of them. Folded neatly on top was a single sheet of paper.

I opened the paper and spent a moment staring at the characters inscribed on it.

I was shaken out of my reverie by the ringing of the doorbell.

"Who's there?"

The familiar voice of my subordinate answered: "It's Clara, Big Sister."

I stood and went to the entryway and invited her in. Her respect for me as my subordinate was of course dictated by our professional positions, but Clara graciously had enough personal respect for me as well that she often came over after work, where we would share meals or pass the time in trifling conversation.

Clara looked at me. Then she suddenly asked, "Is something going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. You simply... somehow..."

Such hesitation was unusual for Clara.

"I somehow what?" I urged her. I was genuinely curious.

"You somehow seem... happy."

"Happy? Happy... Hmm." I shook my head slowly, but then thought of the piece of paper I was holding. I held it out to her. "Perhaps it's on account of this."

"A letter, sister?"

"An unofficial one," I said

"May I?"

I nodded. "Be my guest."

It wasn't just all right for Clara to see this letter. I felt almost obliged to show it to her. After all, she had been rather fond of that man herself.

Clara looked shocked. "This is—"

"Yes. From Shinichi."

More specifically, someone had translated what Shinichi had written into our language. Elvia didn't know how to read or write, so he must have had some Eldant scholar do it.

"The contents of this box come from him as well."

Clara looked inside, mystified.

"This is the 'otaku culture' that has so enamored the Eldant empress. It

seems they call it *manga*."

I took out one of the books and showed it to Clara. I flipped through it; it appeared to depict some kind of story via pictures, presented at great density and over an absurd number of pages. Just thinking about how much time and effort must have gone into the creation of this single volume was enough to make me feel faint myself.

"Huh..." Clara breathed, looking at the manga. I wasn't sure quite what the sound meant. Perhaps she was mystified by it. I couldn't blame her.

"But why would he send such a thing to you, Big Sister?" she asked, shaking her head.

An excellent question. "If you read the letter, I think it will become clear," I said, taking the piece of paper back from her. "He claims these are samples of merchandise to be offered on the black market."

"B-Black market?"

"In essence, he wants to smuggle them."

Clara looked at the so-called "manga," unimpressed. Perhaps she felt we couldn't trust Shinichi's motives. But...

"If instead of ordering me to create something that would cause the people to be more loyal to the King, you had asked me to think of something that everyone could enjoy together... I would gladly have helped."

Shinichi's parting words came back to me. Deep down, he was a bold and eccentric clown. That was why I doubted there was any hidden motive in this illegal offering. If anything, I suspected he just believed that these books would bring everyone the most joy.

And that was good enough.

It was good, period.

Boldness and eccentricity: these were things that, in our rush to strengthen the country, we had forgotten—or perhaps deliberately cast aside. They were the leaves and branches we had cut down in our fervent attempt to strengthen the trunk of the great tree called the future.

But leaves and branches were what eventually bore flowers, and then seeds. Seeds that would become the great trees of tomorrow.

And so—slowly, gradually, without force or intensity, they would bring change. Like saplings suddenly sprouting along the roadside.

“What will you do, sister?”

“A good question...” I turned away from Clara. The truth was, I had already made up my mind. “What do *you* want to do?”

“Me? I will follow you, sister,” Clara said without a moment’s hesitation. It was as if she knew completely what was in my heart. I couldn’t suppress a bit of a smile.

“He is more shrewd than I took him for,” I said, absently flipping the pages of one of the manga. “Talking smuggling with the very country that kidnapped him. And making Elvia his contact point, no less.”

His letter said he would periodically send Elvia back to Bahairam as his courier for the black market. Outwardly, Elvia would be coming back to deliver materials she had collected during her spying. True, some of these manga had already made their way to Bahairam via merchants from the Eldant Empire—but getting them directly from the source like this would make them cheaper, more numerous, and more accessible to the common people.

“We may wish our nation had never gotten involved with a man like him,” I mused. If we weren’t careful, our country might find itself swept away, perhaps in ways even Shinichi himself didn’t fully understand.

I didn’t say anything more, but as I began paging through this book called a manga once again, even I could finally tell that the smile on my face was a happy one.

□□□□□

To Be Continued...

Afterword

Hiyo, light novelist Sakaki here.

I humbly bring you Volume 5 of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*.

I handled this story a little differently than in the past. Well, not that differently; I mostly mean there were multiple perspectives. I decided to treat Myusel, who (seems) quite popular with readers, as almost a second protagonist. As I worked with her perspective, I was surprised to find myself, well, surprised by the character I was discovering.

I mean, for one thing, she seems like the type who could be very violent when cornered. I mentally revived the possibility of making her a *yandere*.

As a point of fact, the reason Myusel doesn't use a 9mm or a Type 89, but a Squad Automatic Weapon, started with a request from my illustrator, Yuugen-shi. I give it some thought and figured that Myusel did do a stint in the military, and maid work involves quite a bit of physical labor (carrying lots of laundry, for example. Plus, using a washboard is supposed to be pretty taxing), so I decided, sure, why not?

Setting aside the convoluted explanations, though, I think we can all agree that a beautiful half-elf girl in fantasy garb carrying a huge gun makes for a great picture.

For the record, the Minimi that Myusel uses (and gets via Minori), along with the equipment from the Eldant garrison, is in my view considered to be obtained from the same place that special forces get these sorts of things. That is, these weapons don't officially exist (on the JSDF manifests, for example). So the Minimi, the gunstocks, and so on aren't technically those used by the Self-Defense Force. Just an obsessive little detail—not that it makes any difference (grin).

So then. Following the rule of ever-intensifying threats, I would expect the next volume to introduce a character who threatens Shinichi's very existence, but how could such a thing happen??

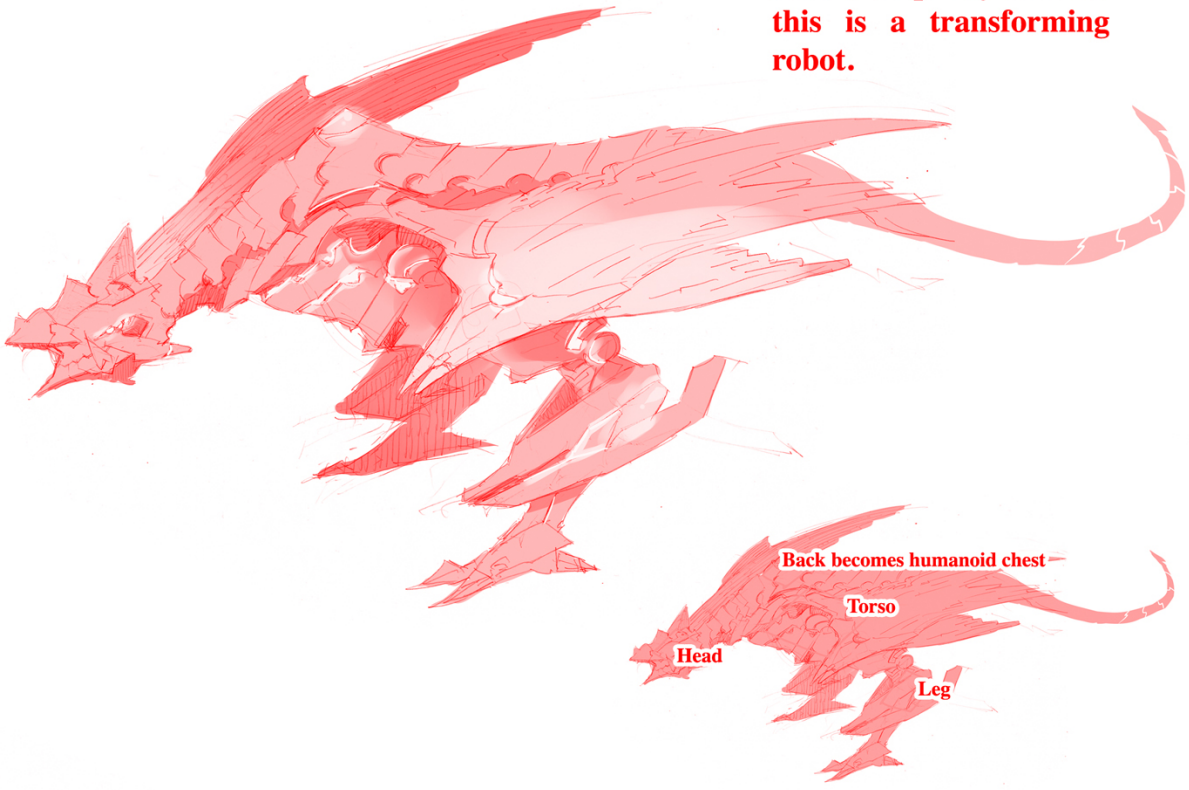
I would love to see you again for the next volume.

Ichiro Sakaki
31 October 2012

<Faldra>

Dragon Mode

Design Principles
The main parts move to conspicuous areas when transforming into its humanoid form, so it should be pretty obvious this is a transforming robot.



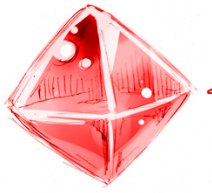
Location of Magical Stones
There are six stones: in the head, the body, the shoulders, and each leg.

Outbreak Company
The Power of Moe

Ichiro Sakaki

<Faldra>

StandingMode



Design Principles

This machine works on the basis of six magical stones (electrical stones carrying a charge) of varying sizes. A frame is placed over these stones. The frame and the stones have no physical points of contact, so when transforming from humanoid to dragon form or back, the frame simply drifts around the stones. It's a very lackadaisical way of transforming.

The light that can be seen running around the body

is overflow from the stones within. (Would this be too obvious at night?)

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Outbreak Company: Volume 5
by Ichiro Sakaki

Translated by Kevin Steinbach
Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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